

From the print by Lavreince.

L'Assemblée Au Salon.

THE LOST ART
OF
CONVERSATION

SELECTED ESSAYS

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

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ILLUSTRATED

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INTRODUCTION

This volume brings together—and it is odd they have never been so assembled before—what we may venture to call the best essays in English on conversation. These essays hold that conversation is one of the chief pleasures of civilized life, and that, if carefully cultivated, it may become a potent factor in the spread of culture and intelligence, as it was in its great periods, in the Athens of Pericles, in the Italy of the renaissance, in the salons of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, and in eighteenth-century England.

The assertions that present-day conversation has sunk far below the high levels of the talk of the past; that our conversational performances are flat, thin, and poor; and the even more sweeping assertion that conversation is indeed a lost art—these are commonplaces that pass unchallenged, and can hardly be gainsaid. There are, however, other commonplaces on this theme, as familiar perhaps as those just mentioned, which need not be so readily accepted—the saying, for example, that the chief rule of conversation is that it must have no rules, and the equally dubious statement that where good talk is con-

cerned our times are out of joint, and that fine social converse will never come again till intellectual and social tendencies have radically changed. On the question of rules or no rules, De Quincey has the right word, and of the truth of it the reader of these essays should be quite convinced. "Without an art," De Quincey says, "without some simple system of rules, gathered from experience of such contingencies as are most likely to mislead the practice when left to its own guidance, no act of man nor effort accomplishes its purpose in perfection." As for the other idea—that we can never talk in the fine style of the past till the scheme of things has changed—such a view goes against the time-honored apothegm "Where there's a will there's a way"—a maxim which for practical purposes it is comfortable to accept, and which the reader who would have the sense of being conversationally elevated by the considerations in the body of this book must hold for true, and this even in the teeth of the fact that conversation has been in the past, what it certainly cannot be just now and here, the daughter of leisured and intellectual societies enamored of the arts and of knowledge. But while making these admissions regarding the past, it may be held that a really ardent devotion to the cause of good conversation can recall to its service a group of fine social

and intellectual qualities that have ever been associated with it.

In arranging the essays in this volume, the two that consider the subject most fully and comprehensively—those by Thomas De Quincey and Professor Mahaffy—are put first.¹ The ideas that the past had provided on the chosen theme are summed up in them, and explicitly presented. The first of the two is certainly delightful reading in itself, thanks to the fine melody of its style, its fluency, its varied cadences, and to its humor and good sense. The second is notable as an admirable exposition of the subject for which the reader will be grateful, even though he be moved to complain of a certain stiffness of arrangement and a somewhat pedagogic manner.

The other essays, beginning with Bacon's *Of Discourse*, follow in chronological order. In *Of Discourse*, with its curt suggestive, sententious apothegms and sage reflections, there is implicit matter that is fruitfully expanded into long and well ordered passages of the later writers represented here. Swift's *Hints Towards an Essay on Conversation* is well worth perusal; his mordant comments on conversational vices—it

¹ Through an error, discovered too late for correction, the arrangement of the essays is in one point different from the plan outlined above. Bacon's *Of Discourse* is put before the essays respectively by DeQuincey and Professor Mahaffy.

was mere indignation at these vices, the author tells us, that prompted him to address himself to the theme—and his hard sense make his brief essay a real contribution to the subject. From the Dean's *Genteel and Ingenious Conversation* (generally called *Polite Conversation*) a portion of the introduction and a representative part of the dialogue are taken. The introduction is a fine bit of irony, and the dialogue an example of well nigh everything good conversation should not be—a satire on the shallow, empty fatuities of smart social chatter, the quips and sallies of fools, the crackling of thorns under the pot.

Hazlitt's two papers, *On the Conversation of Authors* and *On the Conversation of Lords* are full of pith and interesting on different counts. Discursive and digressive they certainly are, but entertaining in a general way, and by no means bare of suggestion upon the matter in hand. The essays of Robert Louis Stevenson that come at the end of this volume make, it need not be said, beguiling reading. And the first of them at least is in that delightful writer's best manner. The irresistible graces of his style are there—his familiar charm, his seeming ease, his racy diction, and happy phrasing, and with these humor, fancy, and sentiment all at full play. More than this he who reads them for conversation's sake will find them abounding in sug-

gestive hints for talkers that will perhaps leave him with a livelier sense than ever he had before of the substantial contribution conversation can make to the sum of human happiness—a sum never excessive, and to which even the smallest acquisitions should be counted precious.

The illustrations to the present volume represent scenes and people belonging to the periods when fine talk was in its rich bloom. Raphael's *School of Athens* goes back to a time and a city in which conversation was a passion, and everyone seemed everywhere, at banquets and convivial gatherings under the firm but pleasant rule of the symposiarch, in the groves of Academe, at the theatre, and in the market places, to be continually in converse, discussing eagerly things past and present, and ardently in quest of some new thing as a theme for still further discourse—a kind of intellectual exercitation that doubtless was largely responsible for the ease, elegance, lucidity, raciness, and flexibility of Greek, as the assiduous and continued exchange by word of mouth of ideas and sentiments in the salons of France undeniably was for the presence of like qualities in the French tongue. When one recalls that, in the period referred to, Plato, Socrates, and Diogenes, to say nothing of their bright satellites, were going about the streets, squares, and gardens enthusiastically en-

gaging all comers in talk, and leading by easy and agreeable ascents to high philosophic altitudes, it will readily be admitted that in that age conversation was a fine art that delighted all intelligent people, and, by its charm as well as its weight and substance, exercised a potent influence alike on art, life, and thought.

In the Italy of the renaissance, too, conversation helped the humanists and artists to bring the gods back from exile and to lead the way to light and freedom. Unhappily the editor's search for an illustration appropriate both to the theme and this epoch was not crowned with success, though such there should be.

The reproduction of the fine eighteenth-century print by Lavreince, *L'Assemblée au Salon*,¹ represents a little gathering variously engaged at cards, in reading, and in conversation; and it suggests the social setting of dignity, grace, and elegance which we associate with the French salons of the century to which it belongs and to those of the preceding century. *Frederick the Great's Round Table at Sans Souci*, after Menzel's painting, represents Voltaire, Frederick the Great, and a party of their friends dining or supping at the royal palace in the midst of Sans

¹ For the loan of the rare print from which this illustration was taken the editor is indebted to the kindness of Mr. Frederick R. Halsey.

Souci, the King's beautiful gardens. No ladies are present, but the scene may be taken as typical of the gatherings of brilliant and original men at Frederick's Court that have become famous in literary history. The vivacity, the wit, the eager quest for ideas, the keen zest for the give and take of good talk, which were apt to characterize any group in which Voltaire was to be found are admirably suggested in this spirited canvas of the accomplished German artist. The illustration after the painting by James B. Doyle, *A Literary Party at Sir Joshua Reynold's* is a portrait group which includes Goldsmith, Doctor Johnson, Burke, Reynolds, and others. The picture is like a page from the great life of Ursa Major.

The Salon of Madame Récamier, the last of the illustrations, is from a painting by William Q. Orchardson. It represents a somewhat later period than that recalled by the other pictures with eighteenth-century themes, but a period in touch still with the old régime. The circle of Madame Récamier's admirers, as represented here, includes Toucher, Prince Lucien Bonaparte, Bernadotte, and the Duc de Montmorency. At a little distance from this circle stand Talleyrand and Brillat-Savarin in conversation with Madame de Staël.

HORATIO S. KRANS.

FRANCIS BACON
OF DISCOURSE

FRANCIS BACON

OF DISCOURSE

SOME in their discourse desire rather commendation of wit, in being able to hold all arguments, than of judgment, in discerning what is true; as if it were a praise to know what might be said, and not what should be thought. Some have certain commonplaces and themes wherein they are good, and want variety; which kind of poverty is for the most part tedious, and, when it is once perceived, ridiculous. The honourablest part of talk is to give the occasion; and again to moderate and pass to somewhat else; for then a man leads the dance. It is good in discourse, and speech of conversation, to vary, and intermingle speech of the present occasion with arguments, tales with reasons, asking of questions with telling of opinions, and jest with earnest; for it is a dull thing to tire, and, as we say now, to jade any thing too far. As for jest, there be certain things which ought to be privileged from it, namely, religion, matters of State, great persons, any man's present business of importance, and

any case that deserveth pity; yet there be some that think their wits have been asleep, except they dart out somewhat that is piquant, and to the quick. That is a vein which would be bridled: *Parce, puer, stimulis, et fortius utere loris*. And, generally, men ought to find the difference between saltness and bitterness. Certainly, he that hath a satirical vein, as he maketh others afraid of his wit, so he had need be afraid of others' memory. He that questioneth much shall learn much, and content much, but especially if he apply his questions to the skill of the persons whom he asketh; for he shall give them occasion to please themselves in speaking, and himself shall continually gather knowledge: but let his questions not be troublesome, for that is fit for a poser; and let him be sure to leave other men their turns to speak: nay, if there be any that would reign and take up all the time, let him find means to take them off, and to bring others on, as musicians use to do with those that dance too long galliards. If you dissemble sometimes your knowledge of that you are thought to know, you shall be thought, another time, to know that you know not. Speech of a man's self ought to be seldom, and well chosen. I knew one was wont to say in scorn, "He must needs be a wise man, he speaks so much of himself;" and there is but one case wherein a man

may commend himself with good grace, and that is in commending virtue in another, especially if it be such a virtue whereunto himself pretendeth. Speech of touch toward others should be sparingly used; for discourse ought to be as a field, without coming home to any man. I knew two noblemen, of the west part of England, whereof the one was given to scoff, but kept ever royal cheer in his house; the other would ask of those that had been at the other's table, "Tell truly, was there never a flout or dry blow given?" To which the guest would answer, "Such and such a thing passed." The lord would say, "I thought he would mar a good dinner." Discretion of speech is more than eloquence; and to speak agreeably to him with whom we deal, is more than to speak in good words, or in good order. A good continued speech, without a good speech of interlocution, shows slowness; and a good reply, or second speech, without a good settled speech, sheweth shallowness and weakness. As we see in beasts, that those that are weakest in the course, are yet nimblest in the turn; as it is betwixt the greyhound and the hare. To use too many circumstances, ere one come to the matter, is wearisome; to use none at all, is blunt.

CONVERSATION
AN ESSAY
BY
THOMAS DE QUINCEY

CONVERSATION ¹

BY

THOMAS DE QUINCEY.

AMONGST the arts connected with the *elegancies* of social life in a degree which nobody denies is the Art of Conversation; but in a degree which almost everybody denies, if one may judge by their neglect of its simple rules, this same art is not less connected with the *uses* of social life. Neither the luxury of conversation, nor the possible benefit of conversation, is to be found under that rude administration of it which generally prevails. Without an art, without some simple system of rules, gathered from experience of such contingencies as are most likely to mislead the practice when left to its own guidance, no act of man nor effort accomplishes its purposes in perfection. The sagacious Greek would not so much as drink a glass of wine amongst a few friends without a systematic art to guide him, and a reg-

¹ First published in 1847.

ular form of policy to control him,—which art and which polity (begging Plato's pardon) were better than any of more ambitious aim in his Republic. Every *symposium* had its set of rules, and rigorous they were; had its own *symposiarch* to govern it, and a tyrant he was. Elected democratically, he became, when once installed, an autocrat not less despotic than the King of Persia. Purposes still more slight and fugitive have been organized into arts. Taking soup gracefully, under the difficulties opposed to it by a dinner dress at that time fashionable, was reared into an art about forty-five years ago by a Frenchman who lectured upon it to ladies in London; and the most brilliant duchess of that day, viz. the Duchess of Devonshire, was amongst his best pupils. Spitting, if the reader will pardon the mention of so gross a fact, was shown to be a very difficult art, and publicly prelected upon, about the same time in the same great capital. The professors in this faculty were the hackney-coachmen; the pupils were gentlemen, who paid a guinea each for three lessons; the chief problem in this system of hydraulics being to throw the salivating column in a parabolic curve from the centre of Parliament Street, when driving four-in-hand, to the foot pavements, right and left, so as to alarm the consciences of guilty peripatetics on either

side. The ultimate problem, which closed the *curriculum* of study, was held to lie in spitting round a corner; when *that* was mastered, the pupil was entitled to his doctor's degree. Endless are the purposes of man, merely festal or merely comic, and aiming but at the momentary life of a cloud, which have earned for themselves the distinction and apparatus of a separate art. Yet for conversation, the great paramount purpose of social meetings, no art exists or has been attempted.

That seems strange, but is not really so. A limited process submits readily to the limits of a technical system; but a process so unlimited as the interchange of thought seems to reject them. And, even if an art of conversation were less unlimited, the means of carrying such an art into practical effect amongst so vast a variety of minds seems wanting. Yet again, perhaps, after all, this may rest on a mistake. What we begin by misjudging is the particular phasis of conversation which brings it under the control of art and discipline. It is not in its relation to the intellect that conversation ever has been improved or *will* be improved primarily, but in its relation to manners. Has a man ever mixed with what in technical phrase is called "good company," meaning company in the highest degree polished,—company which (being or *not*

being aristocratic as respects its composition) is aristocratic as respects the standard of its manners and usages? If he really *has*, and does not deceive himself from vanity or from pure inacquaintance with the world, in that case he must have remarked the large effect impressed upon the grace and upon the freedom of conversation by a few simple instincts of real good breeding. Good breeding—what is it? There is no need in this place to answer that question comprehensively; it is sufficient to say that it is made up chiefly of *negative* elements,—that it shows itself far less in what it prescribes than in what it forbids. Now, even under this limitation of the idea, the truth is that more will be done for the benefit of conversation by the simple magic of good manners (that is, chiefly by a system of forbearances), applied to the besetting vices of social intercourse, than ever *was* or *can* be done by all varieties of intellectual power assembled upon the same arena. Intellectual graces of the highest order may perish and confound each other when exercised in a spirit of ill-temper, or under the licence of bad manners; whereas very humble powers, when allowed to expand themselves colloquially in that genial freedom which is possible only under the most absolute confidence in the self-restraint of your collocutors, accomplish their purpose to a certainty if

it be the ordinary purpose of liberal amusement, and have a chance of accomplishing it even when this purpose is the more ambitious one of communicating knowledge or exchanging new views upon truth.

In my own early years, having been formed by nature too exclusively and morbidly for solitary thinking, I observed nothing. Seeming to have eyes, in reality I saw nothing. But it is a matter of no very uncommon experience that, whilst the mere observers never became meditators, the mere meditators, on the other hand, may finally ripen into close observers. Strength of thinking, through long years, upon innumerable themes, will have the effect of disclosing a vast variety of questions, to which it soon becomes apparent that answers are lurking up and down the whole field of daily experience; and thus an external experience which was slighted in youth, because it was a dark cipher that could be read into no meaning, a key that answered to no lock, gradually becomes interesting as it is found to yield one solution after another to problems that have independently matured in the mind. Thus, for instance, upon the special functions of conversation, upon its powers, its laws, its ordinary diseases, and their appropriate remedies, in youth I never bestowed a thought or a care. I viewed it not as one

amongst the gay ornamental arts of the intellect, but as one amongst the dull necessities of business. Loving solitude too much, I understood the capacities of colloquial intercourse too little. And thus it is, though not for *my* reason, that most people estimate the intellectual relations of conversation. Let these, however, be what they may, one thing seemed undeniable—that this world talked a great deal too much. It would be better for all parties if nine in every ten of the *winged words* flying about in this world (Homer's *epea pteroenta*) had their feathers clipped amongst men,—or even amongst women, who have a right to a larger allowance of words. Yet, as it was quite out of my power to persuade the world into any such self-denying reformation, it seemed equally out of the line of my duties to nourish any moral anxiety in that direction. *To talk* seemed to me at that time in the same category as *to sleep*,—not an accomplishment, but a base physical infirmity. As a moralist, I really was culpably careless upon the whole subject. I cared as little what absurdities men practised in their vast tennis-courts of conversation, where the ball is flying backwards and forwards to no purpose for ever, as what tricks Englishmen might play with their monstrous national debt. Yet at length what I disregarded on any principle of moral useful-

ness I came to make an object of the profoundest interest on principles of art. *Betting*, in like manner, and *wagering*,—which apparently had no moral value, and for that reason had been always slighted as inconsiderable arts (though, by the way, they always had one valuable use, viz. that of evading quarrels, since a bet summarily intercepts an altercation),—rose suddenly into a philosophic rank when, successively, Huygens, the Bernoullis, and De Moivre were led by the suggestion of these trivial practices amongst men to throw the light of a high mathematical analysis upon the whole doctrine of Chances.¹ Lord Bacon had been led to remark the capacities of conversation as an organ for sharpening one particular mode of intellectual power.² Circumstances, on the other hand, led me into remarking the special capacities of conversa-

¹ Huygens, 1629-1695; James Bernoulli, 1654-1705; John Bernoulli, 1667-1748; De Moivre, 1667-1754.

² "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man,"—is Bacon's well-known saying in his essay *Of Studies*; but in his essay *Of Friendship* he discusses the benefits of "conference" or conversation more at large, thus: "Certain it is that, whosoever hath his mind fraught with many thoughts, his wits and understanding do clarify and break up in the communicating and discussing with another: he tosseth his thoughts more easily; he marshalleth them more orderly; he seeth how they look when they are turned into words; finally, he waxeth wiser than himself, and that more by an hour's discourse than by a day's meditation. . . . In a word, a man were better relate himself to a statua or picture than to suffer his thoughts to pass in smother."

tion as an organ for absolutely creating another mode of power. Let a man have read, thought, studied, as much as he may, rarely will he reach his possible advantages as a *ready* man, unless he has exercised his powers much in conversation: that, I think, was Lord Bacon's idea. Now, this wise and useful remark points in a direction not objective, but subjective; that is, it does not promise any absolute extension to truth itself, but only some greater facilities to the man who expounds or diffuses the truth. Nothing will be done for truth objectively that would not at any rate be done; but subjectively it will be done with more fluency, and at less cost of exertion to the doer. On the contrary, my own growing reveries on the latent powers of conversation (which, though a thing that then I hated, yet challenged at times unavoidably my attention) pointed to an absolute birth of new insight into the truth itself as inseparable from the finer and more scientific exercise of the talking art. It would not be the brilliancy, the ease, or the adroitness of the expounder that would benefit, but the absolute interests of the thing expounded. A feeling dawned on me of a secret magic lurking in the peculiar life, velocities, and contagious ardor of conversation, quite separate from any which belonged to books,—arming a man with new forces, and not merely with a new dexterity

in wielding the old ones. I felt (and in this I could not be mistaken, as too certainly it was a fact of my own experience) that in the electric kindling of life between two minds,—and far less from the kindling natural to conflict (though *that* also is something) than from the kindling through sympathy with the object discussed in its momentary coruscation of shifting phrases,—there sometimes arise glimpses and shy revelations of affinity, suggestion, relation, analogy, that could not have been approached through any avenues of methodical study. Great organists find the same effect of inspiration, the same result of power creative and revealing, in the mere movement and velocity of their own voluntaries. Like the heavenly wheels of Milton, throwing off fiery flakes and bickering flames, these *impromptu* torrents of music create rapturous *floriture*, beyond all capacity in the artist to register, or afterwards to imitate. The reader must be well aware that many philosophic instances exist where a change in the degree makes a change in the kind. Usually this is otherwise; the prevailing rule is that the principle subsists unaffected by any possible variation in the amount or degree of the force. But a large class of exceptions must have met the reader,—though, from want of a pencil, he has improperly omitted to write them down

in his pocket-book,—cases, viz., where, upon passing beyond a certain point in the graduation, an alteration takes place suddenly in the *kind* of effect, a new direction is given to the power. Some illustration of this truth occurs in conversation, where a velocity in the movement of thought is made possible (and often natural) greater than ever can arise in methodical books, and where, *2dly*, approximations are more obvious and easily effected between things too remote for a steadier contemplation.

One remarkable evidence of a *specific* power lying hid in conversation may be seen in such writings as have moved by impulses most nearly resembling those of conversation,—for instance, in those of Edmund Burke. For one moment, reader, pause upon the spectacle of two contrasted intellects, Burke's and Johnson's: one an intellect essentially going forward, governed by the very necessity of growth, by the law of motion in advance; the latter essentially an intellect retrogressive, retrospective, and throwing itself back on its own steps. This original difference was aided accidentally in Burke by the tendencies of political partisanship,—which, both from moving amongst moving things and uncertainties, as compared with the more stationary aspects of moral philosophy, and also from

its more fluctuating and fiery passions, must unavoidably reflect in greater life the tumultuary character of conversation. The result from these original differences of intellectual constitution, aided by these secondary differences of pursuit, is, that Dr. Johnson never, in any instance, GROWS a truth before your eyes whilst in the act of delivering it or moving towards it. All that he offers up to the end of the chapter he had when he began. But to Burke, such was the prodigious elasticity of his thinking, equally in his conversation and in his writings, the mere act of movement became the principle or cause of movement. Motion propagated through motion, and life threw off life. The very violence of a projectile as thrown by *him* caused it to rebound in fresh forms, fresh angles, splintering, coruscating, which gave out thoughts as new (and as startling) to himself as they are to his reader. In this power, which might be illustrated largely from the writings of Burke, is seen something allied to the powers of a prophetic seer, who is compelled oftentimes into seeing things as unexpected by himself as by others. Now, in conversation, considered as to its *tendencies* and capacities, there sleeps an intermitting spring of such sudden revelation, showing much of the same general character,—

a power putting on a character *essentially* differing from the character worn by the power of books.

If, then, in the *colloquial* commerce of thought there lurked a power not shared by other modes of that great commerce, a power separate and *sui generis*, next it was apparent that a great art must exist somewhere applicable to this power,—not in the Pyramids, or in the tombs of Thebes, but in the unwrought quarries of men's minds, so many and so dark. There was an art missing. If an art, then an artist was missing. If the art (as we say of foreign mails) were “due,” then the artist was “due.” How happened it that this great man never made his appearance? But perhaps he *had*. Many persons think Dr. Johnson the *exemplar* of conversational power. I think otherwise, for reasons which I shall soon explain; and far sooner I should look for such an *exemplar* in Burke. But neither Johnson nor Burke, however they might rank as *powers*, was the *artist* that I demanded. Burke valued not at all the reputation of a great performer in conversation; he scarcely contemplated the skill as having a real existence; and a man will never be an artist who does not value his art, or even recognize it as an object distinctly defined. Johnson, again, relied sturdily upon his natural powers for carry-

ing him aggressively through all conversational occasions or difficulties that English society, from its known character and composition, could be supposed likely to bring forward, without caring for any art or system of rules that might give further effect to that power. If a man is strong enough to knock down ninety-nine in a hundred of all antagonists in spite of any advantages as to pugilistic science which they may possess over himself, he is not likely to care for the improbable case of a hundredth man appearing with strength equal to his own superadded to the utmost excess of that artificial skill which is wanting in himself. Against such a contingency it is not worth while going to the cost of a regular pugilistic training. Half a century might not bring up a case of actual call for its application. Or, if it did, for a single *extra* case of that nature there would always be a resource in the *extra* (and, strictly speaking, foul) arts of kicking, scratching, pinching, and tearing hair.

The conversational powers of Johnson were narrow in compass, however strong within their own essential limits. As a *conditio sine qua non*, he did not absolutely demand a *personal* contradictor by way of "stoker" to supply fuel and keep up his steam; but he demanded at least a *subject* teeming with elements of known con-

tradictory opinion, whether linked to partisanship or not. His views of all things tended to negation, never to the positive and the creative. Hence may be explained a fact which cannot have escaped any keen observer of those huge Johnsonian *memorabilia* which we possess,—viz. that the gyration of his flight upon any one question that ever came before him was so exceedingly brief. There was no process, no evolution, no movement of self-conflict or preparation: a word, a distinction, a pointed antithesis, and, above all, a new abstraction of the logic involved in some popular fallacy, or doubt, or prejudice, or problem, formed the utmost of his efforts. He dissipated some casual perplexity that had gathered in the eddies of conversation, but he contributed nothing to any weightier interest; he unchoked a strangulated sewer in some blind alley, but what river is there that felt his cleansing power? There is no man that can cite any single error which Dr. Johnson unmasked, or any important truth which he expanded. Nor is this extraordinary. Dr. Johnson had not within himself the fountain of such power, having not a brooding or naturally philosophic intellect. Philosophy in any acquired sense he had none. How else could it have happened that upon David Hartley, upon David Hume, upon Voltaire, upon Rousseau,—the true or the

false philosophy of his own day,—beyond a personal sneer, founded on some popular slander, he had nothing to say and said nothing? A new world was moulding itself in Dr. Johnson's meridian hours; new generations were ascending, and "other palms were won." Yet of all this the Doctor suspected nothing. Countrymen and contemporaries of the Doctor's, brilliant men, but (as many think) trifling men, such as Horace Walpole and Lord Chesterfield, already in the middle of that eighteenth century could read the signs of the great changes advancing. Already they started in horror from the portents which rose before them in Paris like the procession of regal phantoms before Macbeth, and have left in their letters records undeniable (such as now read like Cassandra prophecies) that already they had noticed tremors in the ground below their feet, and sounds in the air, running before the great convulsions under which Europe was destined to rock full thirty years later. Many instances during the last war showed us that in the frivolous dandy might often lurk the most fiery and accomplished of *aides-de-camp*; and these cases show that men in whom the world sees only elegant *roués*, sometimes from carelessness, sometimes from want of opening for display, conceal qualities of penetrating sagacity, and a learned spirit of obser-

vation, such as may be looked for vainly in persons of more solemn and academic pretension. But there was a greater defect in Dr. Johnson for purposes of conversation than merely want of eye for the social phenomena rising around him. He had no eye for such phenomena, because he had a somnolent want of interest in them; and why? Because he had little interest in man. Having no sympathy with human nature in its struggles, or faith in the progress of man, he could not be supposed to regard with much interest any fore-running symptoms of changes that to him were themselves indifferent. And the reason that he felt thus careless was the desponding taint in his blood. It is good to be of a melancholic temperament, as all the ancient physiologists held, but only if the melancholy is balanced by fiery aspiring qualities,—not when it gravitates essentially to the earth. Hence the drooping, desponding character, and the monotony, of the estimate which Dr. Johnson applied to life. We are all, in *his* view, miserable, scrofulous wretches; the “strumous diathesis” was developed in our flesh, or soon would be; and, but for his piety,—which was the best indication of some greatness latent within him,—he would have suggested to all mankind a nobler use for garters than any which regarded knees. In fact I believe that, but for his piety,

he would not only have counselled hanging in general, but hanged himself in particular. Now, this gloomy temperament, not as an occasional but as a permanent state, is fatal to the power of brilliant conversation, in so far as that power rests upon raising a continual succession of topics, and not merely using with lifeless talent the topics offered by others. Man is the central interest about which revolve all the fleeting phenomena of life; these secondary interests demand the first; and, with the little knowledge about them which must follow from little care about them, there can be no salient fountain of conversational themes. "*Pectus*," says Quintilian, "*id est quod disertum facit*":—*The heart* (and not the brain) *is that which makes a man eloquent*. From the heart, from an interest of love or hatred, of hope or care, springs all permanent eloquence; and the elastic spring of conversation is gone if the talker is a mere showy man of talent, pulling at an oar which he detests.

What an index might be drawn up of subjects interesting to human nature, and suggested by the events of the Johnsonian period, upon which the Doctor ought to have talked, and must have talked if his interest in man had been Catholic, but on which the Doctor is not recorded to have uttered one word! Visiting Paris once in his

whole life, he applied himself diligently to the measuring of—what? Of gilt mouldings and diapered panels! Yet books, it will be said, suggest topics as well as life and the moving sceneries of life; and surely Dr. Johnson had *this* fund to draw upon? No; for, though he had read much in a desultory way, he had studied nothing;¹ and without that sort of systematic reading, it is but a rare chance that books can be brought to bear effectually, and yet indirectly, upon conversation; whilst to make them directly and formally the subjects of discussion, presupposes either a learned audience, or if the audience is not so, much pedantry and much arrogance in the talker.²

The flight of our human hours, not really more rapid at any one moment than another, yet oftentimes to our feelings *seems* more rapid; and this flight startles us like guilty things with a

¹ "*Had studied nothing*": It may be doubted whether Dr. Johnson understood any one thing thoroughly except Latin: not that he understood even *that* with the elaborate and circumstantial accuracy required for the editing critically of a Latin classic. But, if he had less than *that*, he also had more: he *possessed* that language in a way that no extent of mere critical knowledge could confer. He wrote it genially, not as one translating into it painfully from English, but as one using it for his original organ of thinking. And in Latin verse he expressed himself at times with the energy and freedom of a Roman. With Greek his acquaintance was far more slender.

² The original article in *Tait's Magazine* for October, 1847, stopped here: what follows is subsequent addition.

more affecting *sense* of its rapidity when a distant church-clock strikes in the night-time, or when, upon some solemn summer evening, the sun's disc, after settling for a minute with farewell horizontal rays, suddenly drops out of sight. The record of our loss in such a case seems to us the first intimation of its possibility,—as if we could not be made sensible that the hours were perishable until it is announced to us that already they have perished. We feel a perplexity of distress when that which seems to us the cruellest of injuries, a robbery committed upon our dearest possession by the conspiracy of the world outside, seems also as in part a robbery sanctioned by our own collusion. The world, and the customs of the world, never cease to levy taxes upon our time: that is true, and so far the blame is not ours; but the particular *degree* in which we suffer by this robbery depends much upon the weakness with which we ourselves become parties to the wrong, or the energy with which we resist it. Resisting or not, however, we are doomed to suffer a bitter pang as often as the irrecoverable flight of our time is brought home with keenness to our hearts. The spectacle of a lady floating over the sea in a boat, and waking suddenly from sleep to find her magnificent ropes of pearl-necklace by some accident detached at one end from its fas-

tenings, the loose string hanging down into the water, and pearl after pearl slipping off forever into the abyss, brings before us the sadness of the case. That particular pearl which at the very moment is rolling off into the unsearchable deeps carries its own separate reproach to the lady's heart. But it is more deeply reproachful as the representative of so many others, uncounted pearls, that have already been swallowed up irrecoverably whilst she was yet sleeping, and of many besides that must follow before any remedy can be applied to what we may call this jewelley hemorrhage. A constant hemorrhage of the same kind is wasting our jewelley hours. A day has perished from our brief calendar of days: and *that* we could endure; but this day is no more than the reiteration of many other days,—days counted by thousands,—that have perished to the same extent and by the same unhappy means, viz. the evil usages of the world made effectual and ratified by our own *lâcheté*. Bitter is the upbraiding which we seem to hear from a secret monitor—"My friend, you make very free with your days: pray, how many do you expect to have? What is your rental, as regards the total harvest of days which this life is likely to yield?" Let us consider. Threescore years and ten produce a total sum of 25,550 days,—to say nothing of some

seventeen or eighteen more that will be payable to you as a *bonus* on account of leap years. Now, out of this total, one third must be deducted at a blow for a single item, viz. sleep. Next, on account of illness, of recreation, and the serious occupations spread over the surface of life, it will be little enough to deduct another third. Recollect also that twenty years will have gone from the earlier end of your life (viz. about seven thousand days) before you can have attained any skill or system, or any definite purpose in the distribution of your time. Lastly, for that single item which amongst the Roman armies was indicated by the technical phrase "*corpus curare*,"—tendance on the animal necessities, viz. eating, drinking, washing, bathing, and exercise,—deduct the smallest allowance consistent with propriety; and, upon summing up all these appropriations, you will not find so much as four thousand days left disposable for direct intellectual culture. Four thousand, or forty hundreds, will be a hundred forties: that is, according to the lax Hebrew method of indicating six weeks by the phrase of "forty days," you will have a hundred bills or drafts on Father Time, value six weeks each, as the whole period available for intellectual labor. A solid block of about eleven and a half continuous years is all that a long life will furnish for

the development of what is most august in man's nature. After *that*, the night comes when no man can work; brain and arm will be alike unserviceable; or, if the life should be unusually extended, the vital powers will be drooping as regards all motions in advance.

Limited thus severely in his *direct* approaches to knowledge, and in his approaches to that which is a thousand times more important than knowledge, viz. the conduct and discipline of the knowing faculty, the more clamorous is the necessity that a wise man should turn to account any INDIRECT and supplementary means towards the same ends; and amongst these means a chief one by right and potentially is CONVERSATION. Even the primary means,—books, study, and meditation,—through errors from without and errors from within, are not *that* which they might be made. Too constantly, when reviewing his own efforts for improvement, a man has reason to say (indignantly, as one injured by others; penitentially, as contributing to this injury himself) “Much of my studies has been thrown away; many books which were useless, or worse than useless, I have read; many books which ought to have been read I have left unread: such is the sad necessity under the absence of all preconceived plan; and the proper road is first ascertained when the journey is drawing

to its close." In a wilderness so vast as that of books, to go astray often and widely is pardonable, because it is inevitable; and, in proportion as the errors on this primary field of study have been great, it is important to have reaped some compensatory benefits on the secondary field of conversation. Books teach by one machinery, conversation by another; and, if these resources were trained into correspondence to their own separate ideals, they might become reciprocally the complements of each other. The false selection of books, for instance, might often be rectified at once by the frank collation of experiences which takes place in miscellaneous colloquial intercourse. But other and greater advantages belong to conversation for the effectual promotion of intellectual culture. Social discussion supplies the natural integration for the deficiencies of private and sequestered study. Simply to rehearse, simply to express in words amongst familiar friends, one's own intellectual perplexities, is oftentimes to clear them up. It is well known that the best means of learning is by teaching. The effort that is made for others is made eventually for ourselves; and the readiest method of illuminating obscure conceptions, or maturing such as are crude, lies in an earnest effort to make them apprehensible by others. Even this is but one amongst the functions ful-

filled by conversation. Each separate individual in a company is likely to see any problem or idea under some difference of angle. Each may have some difference of views to contribute, derived either from a different course of reading, or a different tenor of reflection, or perhaps a different train of experience. The advantages of colloquial discussions are not only often commensurate in *degree* to those of study, but they recommend themselves also as being different in *kind*; they are special and *sui generis*. It must, therefore, be important that so great an organ of intellectual development should not be neutralized by mismanagement, as generally it is, or neglected through insensibility to its latent capacities. The importance of the subject should be measured by its relation to the interests of the intellect; and on this principle we do not scruple to think that, in reviewing our own experience of the causes most commonly at war with the free movement of conversation as it ought to be, we are in effect contributing hints for a new chapter in any future "Essay on the Improvement of the Mind." Watt's book under that title is really of little practical use; nor would it ever have been thought so had it not been patronized, in a spirit of partisanship, by a particular section of religious dissenters. Wherever *that* happens, the fortune of a book is

made; for the sectarian impulse creates a sensible current in favor of the book, and the general or neutral reader yields passively to the motion of the current without knowing or caring to know whence it is derived.

Our remarks must of necessity be cursory here, so that they will not need or permit so much preparation; but one distinction which is likely to strike on some minds as to the two different purposes of conversation ought to be noticed, since otherwise it will seem doubtful whether we have not confounded them, or, secondly, if we have *not* confounded them, which of the two it is that our remarks contemplate. In speaking above of conversation, we have fixed our view on those uses of conversation which are ministerial to intellectual culture; but, in relation to the majority of men, conversation is far less valuable as an organ of intellectual culture, than of social enjoyment. For one man interested in conversation as a means of advancing his studies, there are fifty men whose interest in conversation points exclusively to convivial pleasure. This, as being a more extensive function of conversation, is so far the more dignified function; whilst, on the other hand, such a purpose as direct mental improvement seems by its superior gravity to challenge the higher rank. Yet, in fact, even here

the more general purpose of conversation takes precedence; for, when dedicated to the objects of festal delight, conversation rises by its tendency to the rank of a fine art. It is true that not one man in a million rises to any distinction in this art; nor, whatever France may conceit of herself, has any one nation, amongst other nations, a real precedence in this art. The artists are rare indeed; but still the art, as distinguished from the artist, may, by its difficulties, by the quality of its graces, and by the range of its possible brilliances, take rank as a *fine* art; or, at all events, according to its powers of execution, it tends to that rank; whereas the best order of conversation that is simply ministerial to a purpose of use cannot pretend to a higher name than that of a *mechanic* art. But these distinctions, though they would form the grounds of a separate treatment in a regular treatise on Conversation, may be practically neglected on this occasion, because the hints offered, by the generality of the terms in which they express themselves, may be applied indifferently to either class of conversation. The main diseases, indeed, which obstruct the healthy movement of conversation recur everywhere; and, alike whether the object be pleasure or profit in the free interchange of thought, almost universally that free interchange is obstructed

in the very same way,—by the very same defect of any controlling principal, for sustaining the general rights and interests of the company, and by the same vices of self-indulgent indolence, or of callous selfishness, or of insolent vanity, in the individual talkers.

Let us fall back on the recollections of our own experience. In the course of our life we have heard much of what was reputed to be the select conversation of the day, and we have heard many of those who figured at the moment as effective talkers; yet, in mere sincerity, and without a vestige of misanthropic retrospect, we must say that never once has it happened to us to come away from any display of that nature without intense disappointment; and it always appeared to us that this failure (which soon ceased to be a *disappointment*) was inevitable by a necessity of the case. For here lay the stress of the difficulty: almost all depends in most trials of skill upon the parity of those who are matched against each other. An ignorant person supposes that to an able disputant it must be an advantage to have a feeble opponent; whereas, on the contrary, it is ruin to him; for he cannot display his own powers but through something of a corresponding power in the resistance of his antagonist. A brilliant fencer is lost and confounded in playing with a novice;

and the same thing takes place in playing at ball, or battledore, or in dancing, where a powerless partner does not enable you to shine the more, but reduces you to mere helplessness, and takes the wind altogether out of your sails. Now, if by some rare good luck the great talker, the protagonist, of the evening has been provided with a commensurate second, it is just possible that something like a brilliant "passage of arms" may be the result,—though much even in that case will depend on the chances of the moment for furnishing a fortunate theme, and even then, amongst the superior part of the company, a feeling of deep vulgarity and of mountebank display is inseparable from such an ostentatious duel of wit. On the other hand, supposing your great talker to be received like any other visitor, and turned loose upon the company, then he must do one of two things: either he will talk upon *outré* subjects specially tabooed to his own private use,—in which case the great man has the air of a quack-doctor addressing a mob from a street stage; or else he will talk like ordinary people upon popular topics,—in which case the company, out of natural politeness, that they may not seem to be staring at him as a lion, will hasten to meet him in the same style, the conversation will become general, the great man will seem reasonable and well-bred, but at the same

time, we grieve to say it, the great man will have been extinguished by being drawn off from his exclusive ground. The dilemma, in short, is this:—If the great talker attempts the plan of showing off by firing cannon-shot when everybody else is content with musketry, then undoubtedly he produces an impression, but at the expense of insulating himself from the sympathies of the company, and standing aloof as a sort of monster hired to play tricks of funambulism for the night. Yet, again, if he contents himself with a musket like other people, then for *us*, from whom he modestly hides his talents under a bushel, in what respect is he different from the man who *has* no such talent?

“ If she be not fair to me,
What care I how fair she be? ”

The reader, therefore, may take it, upon the *a priori* logic of this dilemma, or upon the evidence of our own experience, that all reputation for brilliant talking is a visionary thing, and rests upon a sheer impossibility: viz., upon such a histrionic performance in a state of insulation from the rest of the company as could not be effected, even for a single time, without a rare and difficult collusion, and could not, even for that single time, be endurable to a man of delicate and honorable sensibilities.

Yet surely Coleridge *had* such a reputation, and without needing any collusion at all; for Coleridge, unless he could have all the talk, would have none. But then this was not conversation. It was not *colloquium*, or talking *with* the company, but *alloquium*, or talking *to* the company. As Madame de Staël observed, Coleridge talked, and *could* talk, only by monologue. Such a mode of systematic trespass upon the conversational rights of a whole party gathered together under pretence of amusement is fatal to every purpose of social intercourse, whether that purpose be connected with direct use and the service of the intellect, or with the general graces and amenities of life. The result is the same under whatever impulse such an outrage is practised; but the impulse is not always the same; it varies, and so far the criminal intention varies. In some people this gross excess takes its rise in pure arrogance. They are fully aware of their own intrusion upon the general privileges of the company; they are aware of the temper in which it is likely to be received; but they persist wilfully in the wrong, as a sort of homage levied compulsorily upon those who may wish to resist it, but hardly *can* do so without a violent interruption, wearing the same shape of indecorum as that which they resent. In most peo-

ple, however, it is not arrogance which prompts this capital offence against social rights, but a blind selfishness, yielding passively to its own instincts, without being distinctly aware of the degree in which this self-indulgence trespasses on the rights of others. We see the same temper illustrated at times in travelling. A brutal person, as we are disposed at first to pronounce him, but more frequently one who yields unconsciously to a lethargy of selfishness plants himself at the public fireplace, so as to exclude his fellow-travellers from all but a fraction of the warmth. Yet he does not do this in a spirit of wilful aggression upon others; he has but a glimmering suspicion of the odious shape which his own act assumes to others, for the luxurious torpor of self-indulgence has extended its mists to the energy and clearness of his perceptions. Meantime, Coleridge's habit of soliloquizing through a whole evening of four or five hours had its origin neither in arrogance nor in absolute selfishness. The fact was that he *could* not talk unless he were uninterrupted, and unless he were able to count upon this concession from the company. It was a silent contract between him and his hearers that nobody should speak but himself. If any man objected to this arrangement, why did he come? For, the custom of the place, the *lex loci*, being notorious, by coming at

all he was understood to profess his allegiance to the autocrat who presided. It was not, therefore, by an insolent usurpation that Coleridge persisted in monology through his whole life, but in virtue of a concession from the kindness and respect of his friends. You could not be angry with him for using his privilege, for it was a privilege conferred by others, and a privilege which he was ready to resign as soon as any man demurred to it. But, though reconciled to it by these considerations, and by the ability with which he used it, you could not but feel that it worked ill for all parties. Himself it tempted oftentimes into pure garrulity of egotism, and the listeners it reduced to a state of debilitated sympathy or of absolute torpor. Prevented by the custom from putting questions, from proposing doubts, from asking for explanations, reacting by no mode of mental activity, and condemned also to the mental distress of hearing opinions or doctrines stream past them by flights which they must not arrest for a moment so as even to take a note of them, and which yet they could not often understand, or, seeming to understand, could not always approve, the audience sank at times into a listless condition of inanimate vacuity. To be acted upon forever, but never to react, is fatal to the very powers by which sympathy

must grow, or by which intelligent admiration can be evoked. For his own sake, it was Coleridge's interest to have forced his hearers into the active commerce of question and answer, of objection and demur. Not otherwise was it possible that even the attention could be kept from drooping, or the coherency and despondency of the arguments be forced into light.

The French rarely make a mistake of this nature. The graceful levity of the nation could not easily err in this direction, nor tolerate such delirium in the greatest of men. Not the gay temperament only of the French people, but the particular qualities of the French language,—which (however poor for the higher purposes of passion) is rich beyond all others for purposes of social intercourse,—prompt them to rapid and vivacious exchange of thought. Tedium, therefore, above all other vices, finds no countenance or indulgence amongst the French excepting always in two memorable cases: viz. first, the case of tragic dialogue on the stage, which is privileged to be tedious by usage and tradition; and, secondly the case (authorized by the best usage in living society) of narrators or *raconteurs*. This is a shocking anomaly in the code of French good taste as applied to conversation. Of all the bores whom man in his folly hesitates to hang, and Heaven

in its mysterious wisdom suffers to propagate their species, the most insufferable is the teller of "good stories,"—a nuisance that should be put down by cudgelling, a submersion in horse-ponds, or any mode of abatement, as summarily as men would combine to suffocate a vampire or a mad dog. This case excepted, however, the French have the keenest possible sense of all that is odious and all that is ludicrous in prosing, and universally have a horror of *des longueurs*. It is not strange, therefore, that Madame de Staël noticed little as extraordinary in Coleridge beyond this one capital monstrosity of unlimited soliloquy,—that being a peculiarity which she never could have witnessed in France; and, considering the burnish of her French tastes in all that concerned colloquial characteristics, it is creditable to her forbearance that she noticed even this rather as a memorable fact than as the inhuman fault which it was. On the other hand, Coleridge was not so forbearing as regarded the brilliant French lady. He spoke of her to ourselves as a very frivolous person, and in short summary terms that disdained to linger on a subject so inconsiderable. It is remarkable that Goethe and Schiller both conversed with Madame de Staël, like Coleridge, and both spoke of her afterwards in the same disparaging terms as Coleridge. But it is

equally remarkable that Baron *William* Humboldt, who was personally acquainted with all the four parties—Madame de Staël, Goethe, Schiller, and Coleridge—gave it as his opinion (in letters subsequently published) that the lady had been calumniated through a very ignoble cause,—viz. mere ignorance of the French language, or at least non-familiarity with the fluencies of *oral* French. Neither Goethe nor Schiller, though well acquainted with written French, had any command of it for the purpose of *rapid* conversation; and Humboldt supposes that mere spite at the trouble which they found in limping after the lady, so as to catch one thought that she uttered, had been the true cause of their unfavorable sentence upon her. Not malice aforethought, so much as vindictive fury for the sufferings they had endured, accounted for their severity in the opinion of the diplomatic baron. He did not extend the same explanation to Coleridge's case,—because, though even then in habits of intercourse with Coleridge, he had not heard of *his* interview with the lady, nor of the result from that interview; else what was true of the two German wits was true *a fortiori* of Coleridge. The Germans at least *read* French, and talked it slowly, and occasionally understood it when talked by others; but Coleridge did none of these things.

We are all of us well aware that Madame de Staël was not a trifler: nay, that she gave utterance at times to truths as worthy to be held oracular as any that were uttered by the three inspired wits,—all philosophers, and bound to truth, but all poets, and privileged to be wayward. Thus we may collect from these anecdotes that people accustomed to colloquial despotism, and who wield a sceptre within a circle of their own, are no longer capable of impartial judgments and do not accommodate themselves with patience, or even with justice, to the pretensions of rivals; and, were it only for this result of conversational tyranny, it calls clamorously for extinction by some combined action upon the part of society.

Is such a combination on the part of society possible as a sustained effort? We imagine that it *is* in these times, and will be more so in the times which are coming. Formerly the social meetings of men and women, except only in capital cities, were few; even in such cities the infusion of female influence was not broad and powerful enough for the correction of those great aberrations from just ideals which disfigure social intercourse. But great changes are proceeding: were it only by the vast revolution in our *means* of intercourse, laying open every village to the contagion of social temptations,

the world of Western Europe is tending more and more to a mode of living in public. Under such a law of life, conversation becomes a vital interest of every hour, that can no more suffer interruption from individual caprice or arrogance than the animal process of respiration from transient disturbances of health. Once, when travelling was rare, there was no fixed law for the usages of public rooms in inns or coffee-houses; the courtesy of individuals was the tenure by which men held their rights. If a morose person detained the newspaper for hours, there was no remedy. At present, according to the circumstances of the case, there are strict regulations which secure to each individual his own share of the common rights.

A corresponding change will gradually take place in the usages which regulate conversation. It will come to be considered an infringement of the general rights for any man to detain the conversation, or arrest its movement, for more than a short space of time,—which gradually will be more and more defined. This one curtailment of arrogant pretensions will lead to others. Egotism will no longer freeze the openings to intellectual discussions; and conversation will then become what it never *has* been before, a powerful ally of education and generally of self-culture. The main diseases that

besiege conversation at present are—1st, The want of *timing*. Those who are not recalled by a sense of courtesy and equity to the continual remembrance that, in appropriating too large a share of the conversation, they are committing a fraud upon their companions, are beyond all control of monitory hints or of reproof which does not take a direct and open shape of personal remonstrance; but this, where the purpose of the assembly is festive and convivial, bears too harsh an expression for most people's feelings. That objection, however, would not apply to any mode of admonition that was universally established. A public memento carries with it no personality. For instance, in the Roman law-courts, no advocate complained of the *clepsydra*, or water time-piece, which regulated the duration of his pleadings. Now, such a contrivance would not be impracticable at an after-dinner talk. To avert the *clepsydra*, when all the water had run out, would be an act open to any one of the guests, and liable to no misconstruction when this check was generally applied, and understood to be a simple expression of public defence, not of private rudeness or personality. The *clepsydra* ought to be filled with some brilliantly-colored fluid, to be placed in the centre of the table, and with the capacity, at the very most, of the little minute-glasses used

for regulating the boiling of eggs. It would obviously be insupportably tedious to turn the glass every two or three minutes; but to do so occasionally would avail as a sufficient memento to the company. *2d*, Conversation suffers from the want of some discretional power lodged in an individual for controlling its movements. Very often it sinks into flats of insipidity through mere accident. Some trifle has turned its current upon ground where few of the company have anything to say: the commerce of thought languishes; and the consciousness that it *is* languishing about a narrow circle, *unde pedem proferre pudor vetat*, operates for a general refrigeration of the company. Now, the ancient Greeks had an officer appointed over every convivial meeting, whose functions applied to all cases of doubt or interruption that could threaten the genial harmony, or, perhaps, the genial movement intellectually, of the company. We also have such officers,—presidents, vice-presidents, etc.; and we need only to extend their powers so that they may exercise over the movement of the conversation the beneficial influence of the Athenian *symposiarch*. At present the evil is that conversation has no authorized originator; it is servile to the accident of the moment, and generally these accidents are merely verbal. Some word or some name is

dropped casually in the course of an illustration; and *that* is allowed to suggest a topic, though neither interesting to the majority of the persons present, nor leading naturally into other collateral topics that are more so. Now, in such cases it will be the business of the symposiarch to restore the interest of the conversation, and to rekindle its animation, by recalling it from any tracks of dulness or sterility into which it may have rambled. The natural *excursiveness* of colloquial intercourse, its tendency to advance by subtle links of association, is one of its advantages; but mere *vagrancy* from positive acquiescence in the direction given to it by chance or by any verbal accident is amongst its worst diseases. The business of the symposiarch will be to watch these morbid tendencies, which are not the deviations of graceful freedom, but the distortions of imbecility and collapse. His business it will also be to derive occasions of discussion bearing a general and permanent interest from the fleeting events or the casual disputes of the day. His business again it will be to bring back a subject that has been imperfectly discussed, and has yielded but half of the interest which it promises, under the interruption of any accident which may have carried the thoughts of the company into less attractive channels. Lastly, it should be an express office

of education to form a particular style, cleansed from *verbiage*, from elaborate parenthesis, and from circumlocution,¹ as the only style fitted for a purpose which is one of pure enjoyment, and where every moment used by the speaker is deducted from a public stock.

Many other suggestions for the improvement of conversation might be brought forward within ampler limits, and especially for the class of conversation which moves by discussion a whole code of regulations might be proposed that would equally promote the interests of the individual speakers and the public interests of the truth involved in the question discussed. Meantime nobody is more aware than we are that no style of conversation is more essentially vulgar than that which moves by disputation. This is the vice of the young and inexperienced, but especially of those amongst them who are fresh from academic life. But discussion is not necessarily disputation; and the two orders of conversation—*that*, on the one hand, which contemplates an interest of knowledge and of self-developing intellect; *that*, on the other hand, which forms one and the widest amongst the gay embellishments of life—will always advance

¹ *Circumlocution* and *parenthesis* agree in this—that they keep the attention in a painful condition of suspense. But suspense is anxiety.

together. Whatever there may remain of illiberal in the first (for, according to the remark of Burke, there is always something illiberal in the severer aspects of study until balanced by the influence of social amenities) will correct itself, or will tend to correct itself, by the model held up in the second; and thus the great organ of social intercourse by means of speech, which hitherto has done little for man, except through the channel of its ministrations to the direct *business* of daily necessities, will at length rise into a rivalry with books, and become fixed amongst the alliances of intellectual progress, not less than amongst the ornamental accomplishments of convivial life.

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ART OF
CONVERSATION

BY

F. P. MAHAFFY

TO
MY SILENT FRIENDS

PREFACE

IF the reader should inquire what special claims the present author can put forward to treat so complex and indeed novel a subject, the first reply is, of course, that he has thought a long time and with much care about it, and this, for a theorist, is sufficient vindication. But it may fairly be added that a writer on the principles of conversation ought to live in a country where the practice of it is confessedly on a high level, and where the average man is able to talk well. This is an additional justification. Lastly, though examples cannot teach the art, it is to be expected that the writer should not live altogether in his study, but should go out and hear as many conversations as possible, in order to bring his theories to the practical test. These three conditions having been honestly fulfilled, the failure of the book will rather be due to want of ability than to want of honest preparation in the author.

The generality of the treatment may perhaps mislead the reader to think that there is nothing but speculation attempted. This is not so, each single case of general description being

drawn from instances under the author's own observation, so that not a few will be recognised by those who have moved in the same society. But, if justly drawn, they ought to be found in every society.

In seeking for advice among those whose conversation has supplied the best materials for his theory, the author has been fortunate enough to obtain the assistance of the MARCHIONESS OF LONDONDERRY and LADY AUDREY BULLER, who have made suggestions and criticisms which he here cordially acknowledges.

TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN,

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ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

- Conversation (1) is universal;
(2) is necessary; and therefore
(3) It is an art? (§ 2)
(4) Can it be improved?

The great difficulty is this: that it must seem to be natural, and not an art. Hence—

- (5) Analogy of the arts of logic and rhetoric (§§ 3, 4); viz.—
(a) They can never be taught without natural gifts to receive them.
(β) They can always be greatly improved in those who possess these gifts.
(γ) They must not be paraded, or they cease to be arts in the higher sense, for
(δ) The highest art is to attain perfect nature.

So also—

- (1) No teaching by mere specimens and by memory is possible (§5).
(2) All the general rules are obvious, and yet
(3) Natural gifts are necessary to apply them with skill.

I. THE MANNER OF CONVERSATION, or

Subjective Conditions

(A) In the speaker, and these are either—

(a) Physical, viz. (1) A sweet tone of voice
(§ 6).

(2) Absence of local accent.

(3) Absence of tricks and catchwords (§ 7).

or

(β) Mental, viz. (1) Knowledge, which may be either General (books, men), or Special (great topics, the topic of the day).

(2) Quickness.

or

(γ) Moral, viz. (1) Modesty.

(2) Simplicity — digression on Shyness and Reserve.

(3) Unselfishness.

(4) Sympathy.

(5) Tact.

Digression as regards Conditions—

(a) too general—Moral Worth and Truthfulness.

(β) too special—Wit and Humour.

Objective Conditions

- (B) In the hearers, which are either in—
- (1) Quantity, for we speak with (α) one, (β) a few, (γ) many.
 - (2) Quality, for we speak with (α) equals, (β) superiors, (γ) inferiors.
 - (3) Differences (A) of age, (1) older, (2) younger, (3) equal; (B) of sex—men and women.
 - (4) Degrees of Intimacy, (α) relations, (β) friends, (γ) acquaintances (familiar, slight).

II. THE MATTER OF CONVERSATION, or

- (C) The Topics, which are either—
- In Quantity—infinite.
 - In Quality—serious or trivial.
 - In Relation—personal or general.
- (D) The handling of the Topics must be either—
- Deliberative, or by all the company.
 - Controversial, or by two speakers.
 - Epideictic, or by one.

EPILOGUE

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE ART OF CONVERSATION

INTRODUCTION

§ 1. THERE can be no doubt that of all the accomplishments prized in modern society that of being agreeable in conversation is the very first. It may be called the social result of Western civilisation, beginning with the Greeks. Whatever contempt the North American Indian or the Mohammedan Tartar may feel for talking as mere chatter, it is agreed among us that people must meet frequently, both men and women, and that not only is it agreeable to talk, but that it is a matter of common courtesy to say something, even when there is hardly anything to say. Every civilised man and woman feels, or ought to feel, this duty; it is the universal accomplishment which all must practise, and as those who fail signally to attain it are punished by the dislike or neglect of society, so those who succeed beyond the average receive a just reward, not only in the constant pleasure they reap from it, but in the esteem which they gain from their fellows. Many men and many

women owe the whole of a great success in life to this and nothing else. An agreeable young woman will always carry away the palm in the long run from the most brilliant player or singer who has nothing to say. And though men are supposed to succeed in life by dead knowledge, or by acquaintance with business, it is often by their social qualities, by their agreeable way of putting things, and not by their more ponderous merits that they prevail. In the high profession of diplomacy, both home and foreign, this is pre-eminently the case.

But, quite apart from all these serious profits, and better than them all, is the daily pleasure derived from good conversation by those who can attain to it themselves or enjoy it in others. It is a perpetual intellectual feast, it is an ever-ready recreation, a deep and lasting comfort, costing no outlay but that of time, requiring no appointments but a small company, limited neither to any age nor any sex, the delight of prosperity, the solace of adversity, the eternal and essential expression of that social instinct which is one of the strongest and best features in human nature.

§ 2. If such be the universality and the necessity of conversation in modern society, it seems an obvious inquiry whether it can be taught or acquired by any fixed method; or

rather, as everybody has to practise it in some way, not as a mere ornament, but as a necessity of life, it may be asked: Is there any method by which we can improve our conversation? Is there any theory of it which we can apply in our own case and that of others? If not, are there at least some practical rules which we ought to know, and which we should follow in endeavouring to perform this essential part of our social duties?

To assert that there is some such systematic analysis of conversation possible is to assert that it is an *Art*—a practical science like the art of reasoning called Logic, or the art of eloquence called Rhetoric. Now this runs counter to one of the strongest convictions of all intelligent men and women, that if anything in the world ought to be spontaneous it is conversation. How can a thing be defined by rules which consists in following the chances of the moment, drifting with the temper of the company, suiting the discourse to whatever subject may turn up. The instant anyone is felt to be talking by rules all the charm of his society vanishes, and he becomes the worst of social culprits—a bore. For it is the natural easy flow of talk which is indeed the perfection of what we seek. Didactic teaching, humorous anecdotes, clever argument—these may take their part in social intercourse, but they

are not its perfection. To take up what others say in easy comment, to give in return something which will please, to stimulate the silent and the morose out of their vapours and surprise them into good-humour, to lead while one seems to follow—this is the real aim of good conversation. How can such a Protean impalpable acquirement be in any way an art depending on rules? Does it not altogether depend on natural gifts, on a ready power of expression, on a sanguine temperament, on a quick power of sympathy, on a placid temper? Is there not a risk, nay a certainty, that in dissecting it we shall slay its life and destroy its beauty?

§ 3. However natural and reasonable this objection, it is based on the mistake that art is opposed to nature, that natural means *merely* what is spontaneous and unprepared, and artistic what is *manifestly* studied and artificial. This is one of the commonest and most widely-spread popular errors. If such were the real meaning of *natural*, it might be argued that nothing was natural in man above the condition of the lowest savage—the *Naturmensch*, as the Germans call him. And if such were the meaning of *artistic* we must exclude from art the highest of all its functions—that of reproducing, or perhaps even of producing, nature in its most precious and perfect phases. It is a curious

reflection that conventionality and awkwardness seem the most universal inheritance, and so far thoroughly natural to men, that they require either conscious art or the unconsciousness attending some violent emotion to keep them clear of it. The savage has it strongly marked in him; the most enlightened societies are encumbered with it. Ask any child of five or six years old, anywhere over Europe, to draw you the figure of a man, and it will always produce very much the same kind of thing. You might, therefore, assert that this was the *natural* way for a child to draw a man, and yet how remote from nature it is. If one or two of a thousand made a fair attempt and avoided the conventional treatment, you would attribute this either to special genius or special training—and why? because the child had really approached nature.

§ 4. Let us leave generalities and consider practical sciences, which have a closer analogy to the subject under discussion. The science of Logic, or analysis of reasoning, professes to show us how men ought to reason, and to discover the precise nature of their mistakes when they reason falsely. Yet the best reasoner is not the man who parades his logic and thrusts syllogisms upon his opponents, but he who states his arguments as if they came spontaneously and followed one another by natural suggestion. In

fact, the man who parades his logic is one of those poor and narrow thinkers whose over-attention to form mars his comprehension of the matter, and so leads him astray. The logically formal reasoner is generally a bad persuader. And yet logic is not to be blamed for this man's stupidity. The fact that he goes wrong on every practical question is not due to logic, but to the man's narrowness of vision or his vanity in parading an art that does not admit of parade in its proper use.

The case is still clearer with Rhetoric, or the science of speaking persuasively in public. Here we have a science so akin to that of which we are in search, that the points of importance may serve as direct clues to discover what we want. The most obvious points about rhetoric as a practical science are these: it presupposes some natural gifts in the pupil, and though we have notable instances of men overcoming great congenital obstacles by study, the fact of this very conquest shows that a fund of power or of passion lay concealed beneath these hindrances. No stupid or idle person, no person without any flow of ideas ever was, or could be made, an effective speaker by studying rhetoric.

On the other hand, every speaker, bad or good, is greatly improved by a study of this science, and by reflecting on the suggestions it gives

him. There is no orator, however naturally ready and fluent, who will not profit immensely by such a study. Nay, even those who have formed themselves as speakers by long practice, have generally constructed for themselves some such science or body of rules which they consciously obey, and which gives them most of their efficiency and power; so that even if they have succeeded without studying the science of rhetoric, they are not therefore devoid of rhetorical study.

But it is of the last importance, as was already observed in the case of logic, that a man's theory of speaking should not be paraded to his hearers. The moment they are made aware that he has drawn up premeditated engines of persuasion, as it were, in position, they fortify themselves against them, and what the orator gains in display, he loses in power. For here, as in all art, the real perfection is to reproduce nature—not nature in its halting, and stammering, and repetition, but nature in its most perfect and purified form. Here, too, the untutored speaker is always conventional and consciously awkward; it is the trained orator who is easy and graceful; he is in fact at home not only with his audience, but, if I may say so, with himself.

In public speaking, however, studied effects and evident preparation, though not agreeable,

though not showing the highest art, are still excusable, owing to the acknowledged difficulties with which the art is beset. It is not so with conversation. Here, if anywhere, the first thing to be aimed at is to appear perfectly natural. Hence the fact that no "theory of conversation" has yet been attempted. But hence also the fact that such an analysis is very much needed, and that conversation generally is at a far lower level than it might be. The many analogies already pointed out, and many others which will suggest themselves to any intelligent reader, indicate that the line to be followed in this discussion must be determined by the sister art of rhetoric, if indeed conversation can be called a sister art, and not a mere pendant to the art of rhetoric. In general, good public speakers are also agreeable in conversation; the art of persuading people from a platform is nearly akin to that of pleasing them in social discourse, though there are of course some men only fit for the greater and more serious mission, and some who are perfect enough in the lesser yet who cannot rise to the importance of the greater task.¹

§ 5. The analogy, therefore, being estab-

¹ So it was said of Phæax, the contemporary of Alcibiades and Cleon, λαλεῖν ἄριστος, ἀδυνατώτατος λέγειν—a capital talker, but the worst of speakers.

lished, we may feel tolerably certain of the following results, which should be stated at the outset in order to allay any vain or excessive expectations: (1) No teaching of the art of conversation by specimens is possible. Even in rhetoric this is very difficult, and yet rhetoric is busied about weighty topics which must often recur in the same form. But in the case of conversation, except to point out some notable examples in great authors, any teaching by special cases is quite illusory. It would at once tempt the learner to force the train of the discourse into the vein he had practised, and to force conversation is in other words to spoil it. (2) As in logic and in rhetoric, we may be certain that all the general rules, when stated, will be perfectly obvious. The notion of any of these sciences being mysteries, whereby a secret or magic power is to be acquired, is only fit for the dark ages. The broad foundations of logic are nothing but truisms; the rules of rhetoric are founded on these truisms, combined with psychological observations neither subtle nor deep. So we may be certain that the laws of good conversation, being such as can be practised by all, are no witchery, but something simple and commonplace, perhaps neglected on account of their very plainness. (3) But simple as these rules may be, it requires a certain special faculty to

apply them—a faculty which may be called common sense, or judgment, or genius—a something which some men and women have not at all and can never acquire, but which the great majority have in some degree, and this determines their success more than all the rules in the world. So it is with eloquence of the higher kind. What are called natural gifts start one man far ahead of another. And yet these external qualities may be outrun by a larger mental gift, which overcomes weakness of voice, and poverty of frame, and makes a man whose presence is mean, and whose speech at first contemptible, fascinate great audiences with his genius. We will not define what this peculiar quality is in the case of conversation, but it is necessary to feel its presence from the very outset.

SUBJECTIVE SIDE—PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

§ 6. There are no physical conditions absolutely necessary for becoming a good talker. I have known a man with a painful impediment in his speech far more agreeable than all the fluent people in the room. But when a man comes to consider by what conditions conversation can be improved, and turns first of all to his own side, to see what he can do for himself in that direction, he will find that certain natu-

ral gifts which he may possess, or the absence of which he may regret, are of no small importance in making him more agreeable to those whom he meets in society. It seems desirable to mention these at the outset for completeness' sake, and also that educators may lay their foundations in children for after use in the world.

The old Greeks set it down as an axiom that a loud or harsh voice betokened bad breeding, and anyone who hears the lower classes discussing any topic at the corners of the streets, may notice not merely their coarseness and rudeness in expression, but also the loudness and harshness of their voices, in support of this observation. The habit of wrangling with people who will not listen without interruption, and who try to shout down their company, nay even the habit of losing one's temper, engenders a noisy and harsh way of speaking, which naturally causes a prejudice against the talker in good society. Even the dogmatic or over-confident temper which asserts opinions loudly, and looks round to command approval or challenge contradiction, chills good conversation by setting people against the speaker, whom they presume to be a social bully and wanting in sympathy.

Contrariwise, nothing attracts more at first hearing than a soft and sweet tone of voice. It generally suggests a deeper well of feeling than

the speaker possesses, and certainly prejudices people as much in his favour as a grating or loud utterance repels them. It is to be classed with personal beauty, which disposes everyone to favour the speaker, and listen to him or her with sympathy and attention. This sweetness in the tone of the voice is chiefly a natural gift, but it may also be improved, if not acquired, by constant and careful training in early years. It can certainly be marred by constant straining and shouting. It should therefore be carefully cultivated or protected in youth as a valuable vantage-ground in social intercourse.

Similarly the presence of a strong local accent, though there are cases where it gives raciness to wit and pungency to satire, is usually a hindrance in conversation, especially at its outset, and among strangers.¹ It marks a man as provincial, and hence is akin to vulgarity and narrowness of mind. It suggests too that the speaker has not moved much about the world, or even in the best society of his native country, in which such provincialism is carefully avoided, and set down as an index of mind and

¹ It has been suggested to me that a slight impediment or stammer often gives peculiar zest to conversation. But this is hardly the case at first hearing; it is only appreciated when we have discovered that what the speaker is hesitating to utter is worth waiting for. It then produces the same kind of surprise that irony does; which is often deliberate mental stammering.

manners below the highest level. Hence all careful educators endeavour to eradicate peculiarities of accent or pronunciation in children, and justly, though we have all met great talkers whose Scotch burr or Irish brogue seemed an essential feature of their charm. If this be so, no education can eradicate it. In lesser people to be provincial is distinctly an obstacle in the way, even though a great mind may turn it into a stepping-stone.

§ 7. There is yet another almost physical disability or damage to conversation, which is akin to provincialism, and which consists in disagreeable tricks in conversation, such as the constant and meaningless repetition of catch-words and phrases, such as the unmeaning oaths of our grandfathers, such as inarticulate sounds of assent, such as contortions of the face, which so annoy the hearer by their very want of meaning and triviality as to excite quite a disproportionate dislike to the speaker, and to require great and sterling qualities to counterbalance it. However apt a man's internal furniture may be for conversation, he may make it useless by being externally disagreeable, and how often when we praise a friend as a good talker do we hear the reply: I should like him well enough if he did not worry me with his *don't you know*, or his *what*, or his *exactly so*, or something else so

childishly small, that we shudder to think how easily a man may forfeit his position or popularity among civilised men in their daily intercourse. But modern society, which ought to be of all things in human life the most easy and unconstrained, is growing every day more tyrannical and only to be kept in good humour by careful attention to its unwritten behests, unless indeed we have the power to bend it to our will, and force it to follow our lead instead of driving us along like slaves.

No more need be said concerning these physical conditions, which are rather negative conditions, or favourable starting points, than real aids for our purpose. The handsomest man or woman, even with the sweetest tones of human voice, will soon be found out, if dull or unsympathetic, and then these advantages all go for nothing.

MENTAL CONDITIONS—SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE

§ 8. Far more important than the physical gifts of nature, which can only be slightly improved, though they can be completely marred by habit, are the mental conditions of conversation. Among these the most obvious is, of course, Knowledge. An ignorant man is seldom agreeable in conversation, except as a butt; a

man full of knowledge is certain to be agreeable if he will conform to the other conditions of the game. The word *knowledge* is, however, so vague, that we must be at pains to define more particularly its divisions, and consider what kind of knowledge is most conducive to good conversation.

Of course the first question suggested to the reader is whether general or special knowledge in the speaker is to be preferred. There are arguments in favour of each. Let us take the specialist first. There is undoubtedly a great satisfaction in talking to a man who is master of any special subject, even if it be remote from ordinary life. Intelligent questions will draw from the astronomer, from the chemist, possibly from the pure mathematician, curious facts and interesting views on the progress of discovery, which will pleasantly beguile the time even in a light-minded and frivolous company. This opens a field for conversation which is inaccessible if there be no one present to explain or to speak with authority, and so no invitation is more frequent or more welcome than to come and meet a man celebrated in his own line and of wide reputation. The very fact of meeting such a man disposes the company to be sympathetic, and to draw from him the secrets of his knowledge.

This kind of vantage-ground may be occupied by a man of no original capacity or deep learning, if accident has made him intimate with some exciting or absorbing subject of the day. The man who has just escaped a shipwreck, or fought in a famous battle, or survived some catastrophe, has for the moment the advantage of being endowed with special knowledge, which everybody wants to talk about, and to learn particulars from the actual eyewitness. Akin to this is the advantage of having seen and conversed with the greatest men of the day—a feature which lends the principal charm to those volumes of autobiography or of *recollections*, which approach nearer than any other kind of book to the conditions of a conversation.

§ 9. Of course the danger with either of these specialists, the specialist of a day or the specialist of years, is that he will not leave his subject when it has been sufficiently discussed, as he will probably gauge the interest of others by his own preoccupation, and so may become not a blessing but a bore to his company. Though this is frequently the case, those who have gathered company about them for conversation, and have long experience of what is most likely to succeed, will agree with me that to have a specialist present is always valuable. If other topics flag an appeal to this abundant source will

always introduce a new current of talk, and often of the most agreeable kind.

Neither of these mental conditions, which are distinctly valuable in society, include the case of specialists on topics which are of no universal or no permanent interest. Thus there are in English society men devoted to one particular sport or one narrow pursuit, upon which they can talk with authority indeed, and with interest, but only to those who have received the same training. A party of fox-hunters, or racing-men, or college dons, or stockbrokers, who rehearse again in the evening what they have been doing all day, may indeed amuse themselves with talk, but in no sense is it good conversation. One specialist, as I have said, may be of the greatest use in conversation. A set of specialists when they get together are either unintelligible to the average mind or exceedingly tedious.

The same remarks apply to specialists, men or women, who can only discuss topics interesting to one sex. I will not go so far as to say that no conversation can be really good which does not include speakers of both sexes; the divergence in the education and the life of our boys and of our girls is still too wide to make such a limitation reasonable. But it is surely a bad sign of any society to find men's parties considered more agreeable than those of both

sexes, for it is a sign either of licence in men's talk or of narrowness in women's education. There are cases of both within most people's experience. The latter is notably the case in some parts of Ireland, and arises from the want of *political* education in Irish women of any but the highest classes. And so it is in many other countries. But this is verging upon the educational conclusions which we must postpone to another occasion.

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

§ 10. We come now to the broader condition of General Knowledge. This, in the minds of many, sums up in itself all the conditions of good conversation, and yet it is so partial a truth as to be practically misleading. A great mistake lies at the root of such an opinion, which assumes that the first object of conversation is not to please, but to instruct. I could produce one hundred Irish peasants more agreeable than many a highly-informed Englishman, and yet these peasants might in many cases be unable to read or write. Of course to instruct or to be instructed is often very pleasant, and so far knowledge, general or special, is a very useful help to conversation, but it is as talk, not as a lesson, that we must here regard it,

The advantage of general above special knowledge for our purpose is that it can be applied in a greater number of cases, and used to interest a greater number of people. The man of general knowledge can suit himself to various company, and, if he is not able to speak with the authority of the specialist, can help and stimulate in many cases where the latter is likely to be silent. If, therefore, we exclude the object of gaining information, which many people estimate above its importance in our present subject, we must decide that general information is the better condition to promote agreeable social intercourse.

It may be attained in two directions; either knowledge of books or knowledge of men. The former is within the reach of most men, even though it requires a peculiar memory to make it applicable with ease and readiness. We may even say with truth that no man can attain to general knowledge nowadays without reading many books. The danger of a desultory habit, very likely to arise from skimming the mass of ephemeral literature now gushing from the press, is that the facts acquired will not be ordered, and will come out as untidy scraps, not as the details of a proper system of study. The books which a man reads may either be the great masters, which are perhaps rather useful for

cultivating his deeper self than for ordinary converse, or the newest authors, whose merits are still upon trial, and who therefore afford an excellent field for discussion and criticism. In either case there is hardly a distinction to be drawn between the specialist and the generalist, for all people are supposed to study literature, and a good knowledge of either familiar or fashionable books can hardly fail to tell in any gathering of cultivated men and women.

§ 11. There is, however, another kind of general knowledge which is not so easy to acquire, for it requires long experience, a certain position in society, and means for foreign travel. I mean the general knowledge of remarkable men, concerning whom the speaker can tell his recollections. There is often a man of no great learning or ability whose official position, tact, or private means have brought him into contact with the great minds about whom every detail is interesting. Such a man's general knowledge should always make him an agreeable member of society. Akin to this man is the experienced traveller who has wandered through many lands and seen the cities and the ways of men. The peculiar advantage of this kind of general knowledge for conversation is that its very acquisition comes in the practice of society, and that all those defects of narrowness, awkward-

ness, and self-consciousness which often mar the man of books, are rubbed off, as the phrase is, by constant contact with various men. The man of books, on the contrary, has to acquire his store in the silence of his study, and so by a process which rather untrains him for talking, so that even though his knowledge when acquired may be of more solid and permanent value, his way of producing it may put him at a disadvantage.

Let me add before leaving this head that the enormous increase of the means for acquiring knowledge, and the application of great inventions to save time in so doing, are by no means accompanied by corresponding strides in the art of conversation. All the knowledge of the day professes to be curtailed and collected into newspapers, periodicals, and handbooks, just as all the travelling of the day is done by rail and steam, with the aid of guide-books, which save the traveller all the trouble and all the education of thinking. The tourist who formerly went through Italy with his *vetturino*, and saw every village and road deliberately, talking with the people and observing national life, is now whirled through tunnels and by night from one capital to another, where he sees what Cook or Murray choose him to see, just as the man who trusts the newspapers for his knowledge gets scraps, perversions, even lies, served up for him

by way of universal information. It is easy to see that this kind of training, as it interferes with both liberty and leisure of thought, and induces men to spend far too much time in gathering facts, is in no way conducive to the improvement of conversation.

INTELLECTUAL QUICKNESS

§ 12. What has hitherto been said about knowledge in a man of conversation has left out of all account the way of producing it, and merely considered the mental store from which conversation may be supplied. But almost as important as these materials, is the faculty of producing them without effort. This quality may be called intellectual *quickness*, as distinguished from solidity; and of all the conditions we have yet discussed, this seems most due to nature, and unattainable by education. It is indeed sometimes a characteristic of nations. The Irishman or the Frenchman will show this quality with an average excellence far above that attained in England or Germany. It may of course be allied with, or even due to, some such moral quality as sympathy, of which we shall speak presently. But quite apart from it, a selfish man, who has no sympathy for his company, may, by the quickness of his intellect, show bril-

liantly in conversation, while his more solid and worthy fellow is considered a bore. As I have just said, this is generally a gift of nature. Some men and some nations are born with quick wits. But even so it is a great mistake to think that it may not be vastly improved by intercourse with people who have the faculty already well developed. Moreover it is a very dangerous advantage, and if not deepened by solid acquirements, or chastened by moral restraints, may make a man rather the scourge than the delight of his company.

For this is the mental quality which is the foundation of wit, and a joker who merely consults his own amusement, or the amusement of some of his hearers at the expense of others, is not a good converser. The tendency of a very quick intellect is also to impatience, and so it will interfere with and cow more modest minds, which might have contributed well to the feast of talk had they been allowed to work without hurry or pressure. So strong do we often find this contrast that it is unadvisable, in choosing a set of people for conversation, to bring together very slow and very quick intellects. While the former are more dazzled and confused than pleased, the latter feel the delay of listening to long and deliberate sentences intolerable; and so a company in which all the mem-

bers are socially excellent may fail to be pleasant on account of the mental contrasts of its members.

Let me illustrate it by an extreme case. Who would think of introducing a young brilliant flashing sceptic into a society of grave and sober orthodoxy? If the conversation did not soon degenerate into acrid controversy—the very lees of social intercourse—it would result in contemptuous silence on one side or other, probably with the contempt so transparent as to challenge harsh over-statement from the talker by way of challenge or reply to unspoken censure. Could anything be more ruinous to the object we have in view? It may be urged on the other hand that if too many quick intellects are brought together—not a very easy thing, by the way, to accomplish—the pressure will become too great and the conversation move so fast that the strain may become a weariness. I think that any danger in this direction is rather due to the moral defects of the talkers than their intellectual brightness, and so I shall discuss this point under another head.

But if the quality under consideration is valuable at all times, it is so peculiarly when a number of strangers meet together, or when it is the lot of men and women to be obliged to talk together in dialogue, upon a stray or sudden occa-

sion. Then it is, when for example you go down to dinner with a strange man or woman whose name you have not caught that quickness of intellect becomes the prime agent in starting a pleasant conversation. There are, indeed, even here many easy rules which may help to get over the initial difficulty, without those initial chords about the weather whereby so many people, otherwise really intelligent, hide themselves at the outset under the prelude of commonplace. But here as elsewhere art can only imitate better nature.

It is further to be added that as general knowledge, and special also, are principally to be expected from men, so quickness of mind, which is often impaired by deeper study, is the proper attribute of women, and ought to be the distinctive quality of their conversation. This is supposed to be so in French society; I cannot say that it has come under my observation as a general law, the many instances which I have met being always noted and quoted as brilliant and as exceptional, so implying that it was not the rule.

MORAL CONDITIONS—MODESTY

§ 13. We may now pass from the intellectual conditions of conversation to what I may

call, for simplicity's sake, the moral conditions. It is, of course, certain that these so-called moral qualities are frequently congenital or constitutional, and that, therefore, the owner of them deserves no credit for possessing them. But as they are qualities enjoined upon us by moralists, and are in any case analogous to moral virtues, we may in this book, which does not affect precise philosophy, class them as moral. For example, the instinct of sociality, which is really the same as the gregarious instinct in birds and animals, is not the same as the love of our neighbour enjoined by the Gospel, but is closely connected with it, for to be social without being civil is not possible, and civility is at least the imitation of friendship, if it be not friendship or benevolence in outward acts of social intercourse. This, too, appears to be the reason why a particular class of social instincts is so agreeable to men, and so honoured in society—their close relationship to moral virtues.

Let me take up the first and most obvious—Modesty.¹

§ 14. There is no quality in man, still more in woman, which is more attractive and which commands more respect. Every intelligent and

¹I include here under the word all its various gradations from mere bashfulness to that moral self-restraint which makes us fear to assert ourselves, as implying an over-estimate of our powers.

sympathetic person makes allowances for it, and strives to lessen the necessary pains which it inflicts upon the possessor of it in society. It is akin to simplicity and honesty, and opposed to that artificiality which is the outward and visible sign of some kind of dishonesty. It lends a charm to youth and inexperience, so that people who are wearied with the labours of talking to worn and world-stained equals feel, as it were, the breath of gorse and heather after the odours of city air when they come in contact with genuine modesty. It is a quality sometimes allied with that heaven-born genius which attains great results without apparent effort, and, therefore, is not infected with the pride of having gained conscious and hard-fought successes. It is, lastly, the outcome of great and solid labour, which teaches the specialist how much he fails to know, and the general student how small a fragment of human knowledge he has compassed. Here it is no natural quality, but an acquired virtue; yet it excites the same kind of feeling in society.

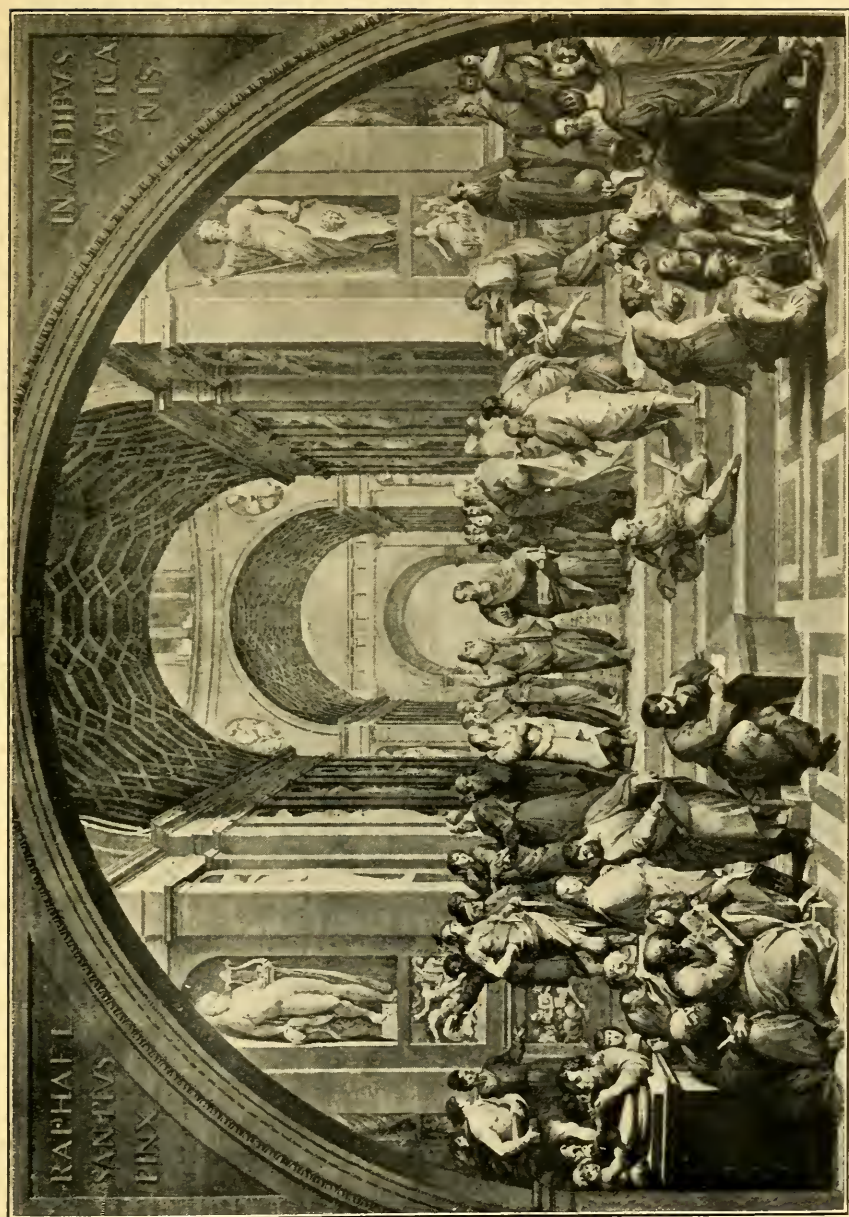
There is, therefore, no quality more highly valuable in society and more certain, *within limits*, to conduce to agreeable conversation. Perhaps the clearest reservation, and one which will cover almost all the various cases, is this: *modesty without simplicity*, though it may still

be a moral virtue, is always a social vice, and therefore highly detrimental to good conversation; for as soon as modesty becomes conscious, it assumes one of two forms—the parade of apology or the cloak of reserve.

I need hardly insist that the man or woman who displays modesty by constantly apologising for native ignorance or stupidity injures conversation, and can only amuse a company by becoming ridiculous. What we want to learn from each member is his free opinion on the subject in hand, not his own estimate of the value of that opinion. How evidently this is a social vice will appear from the fact that an assumption of this kind of modesty is one of the commonest and most diverting forms of humour—I mean the irony which has been the helper of conversation ever since the days of Socrates, as we find him in Plato's *Dialogues*.

MORAL CONDITIONS—SIMPLICITY

§ 15. We cannot analyse the second form of conscious modesty, Reserve, till we have said a few words on the virtue akin to modesty which reserve particularly violates, I mean of the quality of Simplicity. It is a great mistake to say that simplicity as such is always a virtue. There is, for example, the *enfant terrible* who upsets



After the painting by Raphael.

The School of Athens.

everybody and causes shocking shame and confusion by the indiscreet directness of his inquiries. The very same kind of mistake is made by grown people who are ignorant of the ways of society, such as country girls, or girls of an inferior rank, who are married into a cultivated society, and who are allowed such liberties, either for their beauty's sake, or for novelty's sake, that they announce whatever comes into their head, and disturb conversation by their irrelevancy and shallowness, if not by suggesting subjects undesirable in general society. There is also the blunt man, whose simplicity takes the form of rudeness, who thinks it more important that he should speak out the plain truth, than that he should spare the feelings of others. This is again a vice parading under the form of a virtue—perhaps here of truthfulness rather than simplicity, but the two are so akin that at this point we need not draw distinctions. The conversational side of truthfulness is after all little more than directness and simplicity of utterance.

So far then I have put the defects of simplicity first, because they are more likely to be overlooked than its advantages. When, therefore, these important limitations are made, and they affect a great number of cases, we must admit that there is the greatest charm in simplicity, in the temper which without assumption

of ignorance, or parade of inexperience, opens a candid eye of inquiry upon the company, receives with readiness new information, and is ready to tell without conceits or ornaments the actual impressions in the speaker's mind.

It may be found not only along with genius, which is often of this character, but along with great experience and acuteness; we hear, for example, that it is the leading characteristic of Prince Bismark's conversation. I remember it likewise with delight in the conversation of the late Isaac Butt, an Irish genius of the highest order, and a talker second to none, whose life was stormy, and whose character not by any means such as would naturally imply this quality of simplicity. On the other hand, it is quite extravagant to postulate it as a necessary sign of genius, and to say that those who are wanting in it are certainly wanting either in ability or honesty. There are great minds naturally wanting in simplicity, just as there are great minds wanting in modesty or in truthfulness—such as J. J. Rousseau and the great Napoleon in the latter two, and one great English writer of our day in the former, whom I need not name. Human nature will not be tied down in any such fetters.

But when all has been said that can be said on either side, it will remain certain that the

man who appears simple, and who therefore affects his company with the impression that they are in direct contact with his mind, has a distinct advantage over those who either from conceits of style, or over-delicacy of sentiment, or education in an artificial atmosphere, appear with their minds, as it were, dressed or tattooed, and not in the purity of nature.

I need hardly add that it is necessary to sever simplicity from modesty as social qualities, since the one may even contradict the other, though they are so often in harmony. The blunt man above mentioned, who speaks out his mind with oversimplicity, may be very devoid of modesty, and conversely there are certain phases of modesty, such as *prudery*, which make the speaker avoid simplicity, and cover his meaning by various subterfuges. It is when the two qualities work together, and appear habitual to the speaker, that they produce their admirable effect. If he is narrating, for example, a tragic history, or story of adventure in which he has taken part, while his modesty will prevent him from magnifying his own share in the matter, and so trying to the utmost the faith of his hearers, his simplicity will prevent him from unduly concealing his action, and will ensure that he tells the whole truth, so far as he knows it. If again he be asked his opinion on a question

which he has studied, and upon which he ought to be an authority, his modesty may prevent him from giving the company the benefit of his knowledge, unless his simplicity makes him attend directly to the matter in hand, and not to the position of referee in which he suddenly comes to be placed.

MORAL CONDITIONS—SHYNESS—RESERVE

§ 16. We have kept till now the main violation of simplicity, and greatest of modern hindrances to conversation, which we have already mentioned in connection with modesty.

What distinction are we to make between Shyness and Reserve, two qualities whose effects are generally similar, and each of which is a great hindrance to good conversation? We may start from the distinctions in ordinary use. No man or woman will openly claim to be reserved, but many will plead that they are shy. The reason of this is that shyness is assumed to be a physical or at least constitutional thing, whereas reserve implies deliberate choice to stand aloof, and repel any intimacy of conversation as unwarranted either by the circumstances or by the relative position of the speakers. Thus though reserve *may* arise from modesty, it is generally a form of pride, which for that rea-

son no one will attribute to himself.¹ On the other hand shyness is either assumed to be a form, or an excess, of modesty, which is a virtue, or it is assumed to be congenital, and therefore a defect to be excused rather than a fault to be censured. So shy people as a rule rather “fancy themselves”; for though they urge their peculiarity as an excuse for social defects, there lies behind a secret conviction that they at least have escaped the vice of forwardness, or of that coarseness of mental fibre which is implied in forwardness. Accordingly, though there are many people who sincerely regret their shyness upon particular occasions, as, for example, when they are compelled to make a speech, or entertain some great personage, yet you will not find anyone who would exchange it as a permanent quality for perfect ease, or assurance, or total absence of nervousness, or whatever else the opposite of shyness may be called. The more we reflect on this and other similar symptoms in shyness, the more we shall be convinced that here we have not to deal with mere modesty, but with conscious modesty, with modesty without sim-

¹ I am reminded that there are, especially in England, people who desire to be thought reserved, and are secretly proud of this reputation. It is, of course, part of this pride not to declare it publicly. These exceptional cases are, however, to be classed with those of people who are secretly proud of other vices, and do not disturb my theory.

plicity, and therefore really with a subtle form of conceit.

§ 17. There are, of course, cases of children who are allowed to run away whenever a stranger appears, as if nature were a state of war, and man the natural enemy of man. Such children will require training to be cured of their own and their parents' stupidity, and must be taught that every stranger is not a bogey. But this is more domestication, such as we apply to the lower animals. It is also possible, though rare, that some people of refinement and culture may have a physical repugnance to meeting any but their intimates, and that they may make honest efforts in vain to overcome this stubborn nervousness. The great majority of shy people are not of this kind. Thus you will see a girl extremely shy in ordinary society, who blossoms out when she receives attentions from someone who may possibly marry her. Or else you may find a youth, who jumps over a hedge to avoid meeting a party of his acquaintances on a country road, anything but modest in lower society, thus showing that it is a consciousness of unfitness for good company and a fear of being criticised which dominate him. In almost all the cases which occur there is therefore modesty without simplicity, a conscious and almost guilty air: it is often nothing better than vanity which

fears the results of conversation, which desires to be thought well of, and which from mistrust of itself puts on the garb of modesty.

If shyness really arises from this cause, it is a grave moral fault. But in any case it is socially a crime. How can any conversation be easy and natural, how can it range from topic to topic, and bring out the tempers and the characters of the speakers, if any of them displays this vice by dogged silence, by conscious blushing when any personal topic arises, or by the awkwardness which always accompanies this noisome preoccupation with one's self? If then the capital conditions of pleasant intercourse are modesty and simplicity, this defect which always contradicts the latter, and generally both of them, is to be regarded as the most prevalent and destructive anti-social vice. The only high quality which may be concealed, or perhaps even displayed by shyness, is a delicate sensitiveness, which shy people generally postulate in themselves, but which has far better and nobler ways of affecting society than by impeding conversation.

§ 18. Reserve, which few venture to claim for themselves, is a far higher and better feeling, for it implies that the unwillingness to enter upon conversation arises from some deliberate judgment as to the relative positions of the

speaker and his company—often a correct judgment, saving us from the vice of familiarity, which in an inferior is offensive, in a superior uncomfortable, in either case distinctly vulgar. We feel that reserve can be laid aside in pleasant moments, and among congenial people, and that there is often force and dignity behind it. But it is rarely a virtue which improves conversation, and therefore need not occupy us here. It may indeed act as a check on licence, and so by bringing the company back from some aberration, start it afresh on nobler and pleasanter topics. This is so indirect a mode of action, and may be so much more easily attained in other ways, that I need only mention it for completeness' sake.

UNSELFISHNESS

§ 19. Next to modesty and simplicity I class the moral virtue of *unselfishness*. It is very characteristic that we have no other word for this noble quality than the mere negation of its opposite—the most prevalent vice in the world. Why can we not describe it better? Because in particular connections it has other names—loyalty, devotion, self-sacrifice, which occupy a part of the ground with more especial attributes. We are not here concerned with these heights of human nature, with the nobility of grand and

pathetic moments. What shows itself in these as devotion and self-sacrifice bears in our commonplace life a negative and non-descriptive name, and is yet a very distinct and valuable quality, distinct from simplicity, distinct even from sympathy, with which it is so often allied; it may display itself in all kinds of men and women who take part in a conversation. It is not less important to the silent man than to the talkative man, though the latter case is the more obvious. The good talker who monopolises conversation, who insists on keeping other people waiting that he may finish his story, who tells anecdotes which are evidently unpleasant to some of the company, but will not forego his joke for the sake of others—the social bully who makes butts of the more retiring, and sallies at their expense, is the most obvious case of a man failing from selfishness, and losing the great natural advantages he possesses, through want of the opposite quality. This is the man who interrupts others, who refuses to exercise for a moment that patience which he so often exacts.

I have spoken of these people as failures, and such they really are, in the truest and highest sense, for they certainly kill more conversation than they create, nor do they understand that the very meaning of the word implies a contribution-feast, an *eranos* as the Greeks would say,

not the entertainment provided by a single host. But alas! in a lesser and looser sense these people often dominate society for years, and are even sought out as social conveniences, who will keep things going at a dinner table, and supply the defects of silence and dulness so painfully common in English more than in other societies. But the punishment of the selfish talker is sure to come at last, when he lives till his vivacity and his power of acquiring new things fail, while he still presumes on his old reputation. He is then discovered to be an intolerable bore, which, indeed, from a higher point of view, was always the case; and thereupon society, which is as selfish as he is, and insists on being amused at all costs, throws him aside with contempt. He has perhaps still one place of refuge; he may become a high priest in that great modern temple of selfishness—his club; but even there his popularity has waned, and he sinks into the old age unfriended and unsociable—*ἄφιλον ἀπροσόμιλον*—which Sophocles regarded as one of the tragic features in the life of man.

§ 20. I turn now to a far more common, but less observed and less censured case of social selfishness, which requires urgently to be brought into the light of criticism. No man requires to practise unselfishness more than the silent man; for as everybody is able to contribute and ought

to contribute something, so the man who thrusts himself into society to enjoy the talk of others, and will take no trouble to help, to suggest, or to encourage, is really a serious criminal. I have known a person of good position, and not the least wanting in brains, who would insist in sitting at dinner between the two most agreeable people in the room, in order that he might eat and listen, while under no circumstances would he make the smallest effort to entertain in return. These silent people not only take all they can get in society for nothing, but they take it without the smallest gratitude, and have the audacity afterwards to censure those who have laboured for their amusement.

I ask the reader's pardon for illustrating this important fact by a personal anecdote. In a country house where I was staying, the host had invited the colonel commanding a neighbouring dépôt and his wife to dinner, and the conversation was flagging seriously. Some mention of New Zealand in that day's papers suggested it as a topic, upon which a couple of us brought out all we knew about New Zealand, discussed the natives, then savages generally, and so restored the fortunes of the evening. The colonel and his wife still sat silent. When they were gone, we said to the host that we thought it very hard work to entertain people who would not

say anything to anybody. He replied that they *had* said something as they got into their carriage. What was it? The colonel observed that it was very impertinent of people to talk about countries they had never seen, especially in presence of a man like himself, who had not only lived for years in New Zealand, but had written a book about it! This was the thanks we got.

§ 21. There is another special scope for unselfishness in society, which may fitly find its place here. In every company there may be people either socially or intellectually inferior to the rest, who feel themselves somewhat *out of it* (to use a vulgar phrase), and whom the selfish man, the big talker, the ambitious man is apt to ignore. And yet these very people may be in possession of knowledge or of mental qualities which will be of the highest value in conversation. It requires unselfishness to watch them, to appeal to their sympathies, to draw them into the stream and make them feel that instead of being outsiders they are really among people anxious to know what they think and hear what they have to say. Many a time have I seen an unknown and obscure person drawn in this way and become the leading feature in a delightful evening, for fresh and curious knowledge, which suddenly springs from an unex-

pected source, can hardly fail to be profoundly interesting, and to stimulate all the active minds that hear it. Thus I remember a stupid young man successfully probed by an intelligent person, till it accidentally came out that he knew all about the wild cattle in Lord Tankerville's park (Chillingham Forest). From that moment he took the lead in the conversation, and excited a most interesting discussion, in which several very dull country farmers took an animated interest.

All this can be done by mere intellectual unselfishness, by the man or woman who considers that each person in a society should be attended to, and if possible compelled to contribute to the general entertainment. But it is both rare to find this kind of unselfishness and difficult to apply it without the subsidiary faculty or constitution of mind, which many think the whole root of good conversation—I mean sympathy.

SYMPATHY

§ 22. The great Adam Smith, in a book called *Moral Sentiments*, which he seems to have thought out as a sort of antidote to the selfishness of the *Wealth of Nations*, managed to deduce all the virtues from this one root of sympathy. Starting from the fact that man is a gregarious animal, with social instincts, he

showed that the desire to be in sympathy with our fellow-creatures, and so command their love and respect, made us watch them, consider what they felt about us, and avoid everything which might shock or hurt their opinions or their feelings. It was this indefinite and impersonal public opinion which was by degrees made a part of ourselves, and under the name of conscience was set up as "a man within the breast" of each of us to approve and disapprove even our most secret actions.

I quote this once famous theory here, to show how a great thinker, probably the greatest of his age, estimated the force and influence of sympathy; and whatever exaggerations he may have made concerning it in the province of morals, it seems hard to over-estimate it in the province of social intercourse. The first condition of any conversation at all, is that people should have their minds so far in sympathy that they are willing to talk upon the same subject, and to hear what each member of the company thinks about it. The higher condition which now comes before us is, that the speaker, apart from the matter of the conversation, feels an interest in his hearers as distinct persons, whose opinions and feelings he desires to know.

This is the real secret of the power of personal beauty in society. Only a very small num-

ber of people will fall in love with each beautiful man or woman. But nearly everyone will be so far attracted by beauty that he will pay attention to what the beautiful person says, and feel a keen interest to know what mind and temper accompanies such perfection of form. Thus personal beauty secures the sympathy of any company, so much so, that even when found out to be a mere shell, with no mental force behind it, the attraction lasts, and lends some charm to what would otherwise be called trivial and stupid. This natural sympathy with beauty of external form is a sort of symbol of the feeling which seeks for any mental beauty or advantage to be found in a company, and by showing an interest in it, disposes the possessor of it to expand and become friendly in response to such appreciation. The sympathetic man will feel that his company talk best about the things they know best, or have had special opportunities of learning, and he will be naturally anxious to find the best side of them, and to exhibit it by his suggestions. And as in every conversation there must not only be good talking but good listening, the intellectual gifts which make the talker are often marred if he has not the sympathy which makes the listener.

This remark suggests that the social virtues of the sexes are broadly distinguished by some

such principle. Women ought not to be obliged to lead in a conversation, but it will grow dry and dull if they are not ready with their sympathy to hear what is said with pleasure, and to stimulate others by quick and intelligent appreciation. I have known a clever woman maintain a deservedly high character for her conversation who really said very little, but was so sympathetic that she made her guests eloquent, and thus so thoroughly pleased with themselves, that she was lit up by the glow of their satisfaction, and earned very justly the credit for talking well simply because she made others talk. There is probably no social talent higher than this—or rarer.

§ 23. But I suppose no one will be disposed to dispute this, or to underrate the value of sympathy as a quality for conversation. It is much more likely that people may think to simplify the whole matter by arguing that, with the postulate of some brains and some education, all that is required is sympathy, and the more of it the better, so that nothing else remains to be said. We must, therefore, consider carefully how far this is true, and whether there be not some important limitations which complicate the question.

There is one on the very surface. Sympathy must not be excessive in quality, which makes it

demonstrative, and therefore likely to repel its object. We have an excellent word which describes the over-sympathetic person, and marks the judgment of society, when we say that he or she is *gushing*. Of course as women are more frequently endowed with this virtue than men, they also err more frequently in the excess, at least in Teutonic races, for among Latin races a gushing man is quite a common phenomenon. This sort of person not only volunteers to show his sympathy before it is required, and often spoils conversation at the outset, but is ever ready to agree with everybody, so making a discussion, which implies differences in opinion, impossible. There results a social impression of a mixed kind, which is even more disagreeable than downright dislike, and therefore socially worse—I mean that of feeling a dislike and contempt for a person who is known to be full of goodness and benevolence. Many people resent being obliged to confuse their judgment in this way, and feel a stronger antipathy to this marred goodness than to proclaimed evil.

In the next place, sympathy must not be excessive in quantity or indiscriminate, otherwise it ceases to have any great social value. The most seductive way of conveying your sympathy to another is to join with him in some strong antipathy, thus showing that all the world can-

not claim your friendship, but that you distribute your likes and dislikes with judgment and discrimination. A man who is known to have a special sympathy for some particular age or sex or class in society is far more agreeable to that class than he who embraces all the world in his affections. Nay, if one usually reserved or shy expands for once, or to some few people, in contrast to his usual habit, this sympathy is indeed treasured as a real token of confidence.

These and many similar observations, which will occur to the intelligent reader, will indicate how important are the limitations of sympathy, and how essential it is that this, like every other social virtue, should be carefully husbanded, and not squandered at random without regard to its value. I should add that the foregoing remarks are specially applicable to English (I do not mean English-speaking) society. There is no people more distant and reserved in social intercourse, or that more resents any display of feeling, most of all of sympathy, without a careful introduction and considerable intimacy among the company. Thus those who are accustomed to freer and more outspoken societies, not to say French and Italian life, may make social mistakes in England on the score of sympathy, which are sins only in the heavy atmosphere of Anglo-Saxon manners.

MORAL CONDITIONS—TACT

§ 24. The highest and best of all the moral conditions for conversation is what we call *tact*. I say a condition, for it is very doubtful whether it can be called a single and separate quality; more probably it is a combination of intellectual quickness with lively sympathy. But so clearly is it an intellectual quality, that of all others it can be greatly improved, if not actually acquired, by long experience in society. Like all social excellences it is almost given as a present to some people, while others with all possible labour never acquire it. As in billiard-playing, shooting, cricket, and all these other facilities which are partly mental and partly physical, many never can pass a certain point of mediocrity; but still even those who have the talent must practise it, and only become really distinguished after hard work. So it is in art. Music and painting are not to be attained by the crowd. Not even the just criticism of these arts is attainable without certain natural gifts; but a great deal of practice in good galleries and at good concerts, and years spent among artists, will do much to make even moderately-endowed people sound judges of excellence.

Tact, which is the sure and quick judgment

of what is suitable and agreeable in society, is likewise one of those delicate and subtle qualities or a combination of qualities which is not very easily defined, and therefore not teachable by fixed precepts; but we can easily see that it is based on all the conditions we have already discussed. Some people attain it through sympathy; others through natural intelligence; others through a calm temper; others again by observing closely the mistakes of their neighbours. As its name implies, it is a sensitive touch in social matters, which feels small changes of temperature, and so guesses at changes of temper; which sees the passing cloud on the expression of one face, or the eagerness of another that desires to bring out something personal for others to enjoy. This quality of tact is of course applicable far beyond mere actual conversation. In nothing is it more useful than in preparing the right conditions for a pleasant society, in choosing the people who will be in mutual sympathy, in thinking over pleasant subjects of talk and suggesting them, in seeing that all disturbing conditions are kept out, and that the members who are to converse should be all without those small inconveniences which damage society so vastly out of proportion to their intrinsic importance.

§ 25. This social skill is generally supposed

to be congenital, especially in some women, and no one thinks of laying down rules for it, as its application is so constant, various, and often sudden. Yet it is certain that anyone may improve himself by reflection on the matter, and so avoid those shocking mistakes which arise from social stupidity. Thus in the company of a woman who is a man's third wife, most people will instinctively avoid jokes about Blue Beard, or anecdotes of comparison between a man's several wives, of which so many are current in Ireland. But quite apart from instinct, an experienced man who is going to tell a story which may have too much point for some of those present, will look round and consider each member of the party, and if there be a single stranger there whose views are not familiar to him, he will forego the pleasure of telling the story rather than make the social mistake of hurting even one of the guests. On the other hand, this very example shows how a single stranger may spoil a whole conversation by inducing caution in the speakers and imposing upon them such reserve as is inconsistent with a perfectly easy flow of talk.

Another evidence of tact is the perception that a topic has been sufficiently discussed, and that it is on the point of becoming tedious. There is nothing which elderly people should

watch more carefully in themselves, for even those once gay and brilliant are almost certain to become prosy with age, and to dwell upon their favourite topics as if this preference were shared by all society. But even the young must be here perpetually upon the watch, and show their tact by refraining from too many questions or too much argument upon any single subject, which becomes a bore to others.¹ Every host and hostess should make it their first duty to watch this human weakness, and should lead away the conversation when it threatens to stay in the same groove. It is better to do this bluntly and confessedly than to refrain from doing it. But the quality of tact, as it quickly perceives the growing mischief, is also quick of resource in devising such interruptions as may seem natural or unavoidable, so as to beguile the company into new paths, and even make the too persistent members lay aside their threadbare discussion without regret.

¹ Even too careful an attention to grammar, and the careful rounding of periods in easy intercourse, is apt to be tedious, and should be avoided. The instant the company has grasped your idea, you should pass to something else without regard to the form of your sentence.

CONDITIONS TOO GENERAL—MORAL WORTH
AND TRUTHFULNESS

§ 26. In all the faculties hitherto enumerated, it has been my principle to select and specify those which are capable of improvement by conscious training. I have over and over again admitted that nature—probably meaning by nature *heredity*—has endowed some people with gifts which others must strive to attain by exercise. But I have hitherto excluded such conditions as are either too wide to be called conditions of conversation, or too special ever to be attained without great and peculiar natural gifts.

Of the first kind are general moral worth and truthfulness, which afford the proper ground for respect, and which therefore give weight and importance to anything the speaker says. In cases of moral doubt, in cases of disputed fact, the authority of such a person is a welcome haven of rest for those that distrust other evidence, and like a great authority in a science expounding the principles of that science, so a man or woman of high character may be of much service in conversation. But, of course, it would be ridiculous to recommend the cultivation of this lofty character for the sake of conversation.

It is perhaps more practical to observe that an over-seriousness in morals may be detrimental to the ease and grace, above all to the playfulness, of talk. Let me not be misunderstood in this matter. There is no more valuable and useful check on the degenerating of talk into ribaldry, profanity, or indecency, than the presence of a mind of solid moral worth, which will not tolerate such licence. There are companies, especially of young men, where such things are taken for wit, and which thus show a degradation of the conception of talk that would very soon render conversation intolerable to any intelligent man, not only from its coarseness, but from its dulness. No man, no society, can be called witty, which has not far better credentials than that. Every company of men ought to import two or three grave and reverend people into their circles for the purpose of checking such ruinous excesses, if there be any probability that the conversation may stray into this slough of mire.

§ 27 But on the other hand, there is such a thing in society—Aristotle saw it long ago—as being over-scrupulous in truthfulness. Even a consummate liar, though generally vulgar, and therefore offensive, is a better ingredient in a company than the scrupulously truthful man, who weighs every statement, questions every

fact, and corrects every inaccuracy. In the presence of such a social scourge I have heard a witty talker pronounce it the golden rule of conversation to *know nothing accurately*. Far more important is it, in my mind, to *demand* no accuracy. There is no greater or more common blunder in society than to express disbelief or scepticism in a story told *for the amusement of the company*. The object of the speaker is not to instruct, but to divert, and to ask him: Is that really true? or to exclaim: Really that is too much to expect us to believe! shows that the objector is a blockhead unfit for any amusing conversation. The only social criticism on such a story, if it be really beyond the bounds of reasonable belief, is to out-do it with another still more extravagant, and so to bring back the company with laughter, and by excess of exaggeration to a soberer vein. The seriousness of the blunder just noted is not felt till we have learned that there is a vast number of real facts in nature so strange at first hearing, that they excite active scepticism, and that you may lay a wager with anyone to pass them off as lies. In fact, any society only familiar with one class of natural facts, can be furnished with facts from another sphere in nature which the majority will disbelieve.¹

¹ For example, to men of town life, or of mere books, it

The point of importance in the present connection is that, if a man is reporting what he knows to be true, and finds himself disbelieved, he will certainly either feel hurt, or will conceive such contempt for the ignorance and bad manners of his hearers that he will make no further effort to help the conversation.

The outcome, therefore, of what has here been said about high moral worth and extreme truthfulness, is that these virtues, though lending the speaker dignity, must not be allowed to tyrannise. The great and good man must unbend; he must acquiesce in being amused; he must even connive at inaccuracies, and smile at what he considers inventions; he must for the nonce regard recreation as his direct object.

CONDITIONS TOO SPECIAL—WIT AND HUMOUR

§ 28. There may have been times and nations where conversation was regarded as so serious and important an engine of education, that sound argument, brilliant illustration, and ample information, took the highest place as qualities

will seem incredible that a fish should shoot flies with a drop of water, or a diver carry about its egg hugged against its breast, or that an otter should take a single bite out of a salmon and leave the rest, or that a woodcock should carry its young in its bill, all of which facts in natural history I have myself heard told to intelligent pedants, and set down by them as impudent inventions.

of talk. Perhaps they do in some cases now, as, for example, everybody who knows him will concede to Mr. Gladstone the palm as a very charming man in society by reason of these qualities. But among hard-working and somewhat fatigued people, who have been pursuing information of various kinds in all their working hours, conversation must be of the nature of relaxation; it must be amusing first, instructive afterwards, and so it is that nowadays no qualities, however valuable, rank so high in popular estimation for social purposes, as wit and humour.

I will not ascend to a philosophical analysis of these terms, or attempt to answer the obscure and difficult question: What is it that makes us laugh, and why we seem to have in this somewhat trivial point a special feature distinguishing us from all the lower animals? They may have the faculty of reason; they seem entirely devoid of the faculty of ridicule. Nay, even in the scale of civilisation, it is remarkable that the savage and the ignorant laugh less and understand less of this great fund of enjoyment than civilised people. There are also, of course, national differences. The English boor seldom laughs, and then at very coarse fun; the Italian or the Irishman often, and very innocently; the modern Greek, though highly intelligent and

keen, very seldom, apparently from want of taste for the ridiculous.

As regards the distinction between wit and humour, all I need here insist upon is that the former consists in quick flashes in prompt repartee, in quaint comparison; while the latter is sustained; it is a comic way of looking at serious things, a flavouring of narrative, a perception of a ludicrous vein in human life and character. Both these are now esteemed very highly, perhaps beyond their value, in society, but they are so specially natural gifts, and are so impossible to attain by practice, that they cannot be enjoined as conditions to which every talker must conform; they can only be described, and their force or weakness illustrated.

§ 29. There is nothing that requires to *appear* spontaneous more stringently than either of these qualities, and yet we read of great wits, like Sheridan, who carefully prepared their sallies, and even suborned someone to lead up to them. The effect of knowing this is to detract greatly from the enjoyment of the company, and still more from the reputation of the speaker. Most of us would say that, however brilliant in writing comedies, Sheridan must have been distinctly wanting in that gift of spontaneous and ready wit which flashes out at the least provocation, and is mere intellectual playfulness, like

the playfulness of a young and happy animal.

So strongly do we feel this in Irish society, where wit is less uncommon than elsewhere, and where it is no less highly prized, that a kind of social religion warns us not to study it beforehand, and anyone suspected of coming out with prepared smart things is received by the company with ridicule. Yet for all that, it cannot possibly be denied that as most of the brilliant things which a man uses in any conversation must be at second hand—to invent such things one after another at the moment being beyond the power of human genius—they must depend upon a good memory, and this may best be aided by having things written down, which would else escape and be lost.

We should, therefore, conclude that every man who goes into society, and has an inclination for that kind of conversation, ought to keep some record of the happy trifles he hears upon various occasions. But it seems, at least in Ireland, as if the repugnance to doing this amounted to a conclusive argument against it. It is assumed that as surely as a man has such a store, which he looks up beforehand, so surely will he force the conversation toward his points, or bring them in when irrelevant; and an irrelevant joke is hardly a real joke. I have known, indeed, of a college Don having a note-book of wit in his

pocket, and peeping at it under the table to refresh his memory. This was regarded as far the best joke about him, and the laughter before he spoke was always greater than when he had sped his shaft. In actual society it has never occurred to me to meet anyone who has sustained a reputation for wit in this way. We think that if the suggestion of the current conversation is not strong enough to bring up a smart point naturally, and without effort, it is better that it should be forgotten or unsaid. Let me add the significant fact, that in spite of endless attempts, no printed collection of jokes has ever attained even a decent position in literature.¹

So much for wit; the case of humour is slightly different.

HUMOUR

§ 30. If wit be the quick flash, the electric spark, the play of summer lightning which warms the colour of conversation, humour is the sustained side of the ridiculous, the comic way of looking at things and people, which may be manifested either in comment upon the statements made by others or in narrating one's own experiences. Of course in receiving and com-

¹ I believe I should mention Dean Ramsay's well-known book as an exception.

menting upon what is being said, no preparation is possible. It depends altogether upon a mental attitude, which looks out with a smile upon the world, and exposes the ridiculous side of human life not more by irony of comment than by mock approval of social vices, mock indignation at social virtues, seriousness when false comedy is being produced, raillery when false tragedy is being paraded with insincerity or empty bombast. In these and a hundred other ways humour receives and criticises what other people say in a company; and if it be coupled *with kindness of heart and with tact*, may be regarded as the very highest of conversational virtues.

Analogous to this is the display of humour, not in receiving, but in producing ideas in company. The humorist is the only good and effective story-teller; for if he is to monopolise a conversation, and require others to listen to him, it must be by presenting human life under a fresh and piquant aspect—in fact, as a little comedy. Thus the lifelike portrayal of any kind of foible—pomposity, obsequiousness, conceit, hypocrisy, nay even of provincial accent or ungrammatical language—ensures a pleased and therefore agreeable audience, and opens the way for easy and sympathetic intercourse. It is perhaps not too much to say that in any society

where conventionality becomes a threatening power, humour is our great safeguard from this kind of vulgarity. Let me point as an illustration of this to the social sketches in *Punch*, which for years back have been the truest mirror of the vulgarities of English society. The humorous exhibition of these foibles is the most effective way we know of bringing them before the public mind, and of warning people that here is a judge whose censure is really to be feared. We may also learn from the success of this extraordinary paper how much more valuable and more respected prepared humour is than prepared wit. The jokes in the text pass by unheeded, while the sketches of character are thought deserving of a permanent place in our literature.

§ 31. I need hardly add that the abuse of these great natural gifts is not only possible, but frequent, and in both it arises from the same mental defects—conceit and selfishness. A man who can say a good thing or make a person appear ridiculous may be so proud of his power that he exercises it at the cost of good taste and even of real humanity. The great wit is often cruel, and even glories in wounding to the quick the sensibilities of others. If he can carry some of the company with him he has a wicked enjoyment in making one of the rest a butt or target

for his shafts, and so destroying all wholesome conversation. He may leave in the minds of his society an admiration of his talent, but often a serious dislike of his character. With such feelings abroad he will injure conversation far more than he promotes it. People may consent to go into his company to hear him talk, but will avoid talking in his presence.

The excesses of the humourist are perhaps rather those of a complacent selfishness, which does not hesitate to monopolise the company with long stories in which all do not feel an interest. But humour is its own antidote; and if a man have the true vein in him he will also have the tact to feel when he is tedious, and when his fun is out of harmony with his hearers. For these reasons it is not only a higher, but a safer gift than wit for the purposes of conversation; the pity of it is that so few possess it, and that there is hardly any use in trying to attain it by education. No doubt the constant society of an elder or superior who looks at things in this way may stimulate it in the young, but with the danger of making them sarcastic and satirical, which are grave faults, and which are the distortion of humour to ill-natured and unsocial purposes, so that even in this view of the matter education in humour may turn out a very mischievous failure.

On the whole we must set ourselves to carry on society and to make good conversation without any large help from these brilliant but dangerous gifts. Occasional flashes will occur to ordinary people, and sometimes the very circumstances themselves will create a situation so humorous that it requires no genius to bring it home to the company. But beyond the necessary cautions above indicated we cannot bring it into any systematic doctrine of social intercourse.

OBJECTIVE CONDITIONS. THE COMPANY—ITS NUMBER

§ 32. We have now exhausted all the conditions which lie in the speaker, which must be brought by him into a society as the subjective conditions of good conversation. Let us turn to the company, regarded as the object with which he is to deal, and see what an analysis of its varieties may teach us in the way of practical direction.

The very first and most obvious division is that of quantity. You may be required to converse either with one person, with a few, or with many. And though no agreeable person may take the trouble to think about it, he neverthe-

less makes considerable modifications in his talk according to these circumstances. Thus a colloquy with a single person, which is the easiest form, for it is usually with someone who is not a stranger, and it allows far more personality, should consist in a direct interchange of serious opinion, in which each seeks to make the other speak out in confidence his inmost character. You should turn the conversation upon the other person's life, inquire into his or her history, so far as that can be done with good taste and without impertinence, and so induce him (or her) to give personal recollections or confessions, which are to the teller of them generally of the deepest interest. But you will not elicit these without some frankness on your own part, sometimes without volunteering some slight confession which may induce the other to open the flood-gates of his inner life. When this is once attained there must ensue good conversation; for to have a volume of human character laid open before you and to turn over its pages at leisure, is one of the highest and most intense recreations known to an intelligent mind. Such confessions will hardly ever be made to more than one person at a time, and a sympathetic freedom in encouraging the timid by giving parallel experiences in your own life will often make a

silent and reserved person agreeable who could never be induced to speak out in a larger company.

As our manners and customs determine these things, it is not usual to have a long *tête-à-tête* with another person of the same sex without choosing your companion and seeking out the opportunity; but, on the contrary, two people of different sexes are often brought together and ordered (so to speak) to converse, for no other reason than the command of society. Thus a young man is introduced to a partner at a ball, or a man of soberer age is directed to take a lady down to dinner. Here, though the company is large, the conversation is really of the kind before us—a dialogue between two persons only, of different sexes, and often comparative strangers. There is no case more frequent where conversation is imperative, and where failures are common and conspicuous. It is bad enough to begin with truisms about the weather—an excusable exordium; it is far worse and more disgraceful to end with them, and positively many people get no further. And yet this failure is not from mere emptiness of mind. These very same people, young and old, could be brought into circumstances where almost any of them would be interesting—not a few of them eloquent.

I have spent an evening shut up with a very unpromising commercial traveller in a remote country inn, and yet by trying honestly to find out what he knew and liked, succeeded in drawing from him a most interesting account of his experiences, first in tea-tasting, then in tea-selling to the Irish peasants in the remote glens of Donegal. What he told me was quite worthy to make an article in a good magazine. Yet a more unpromising subject for a long dialogue could hardly be found. He and I had apparently not a single interest in common. But when the vein was touched one had to supply nothing but assent, or an occasional question; the man flowed on with an almost natural eloquence. People said that others had found him morose and unapproachable. It was certainly their fault. This case is cited as an instance that almost anybody can be made to talk, unless he has determined positively that he will not do so, and is moreover a very obstinate person.

§ 33. In the cases with which we started no such obstinacy exists; the people are really ready to talk, but don't know how. The beginning is evidently the difficulty, and surely here, if anywhere, people who have no natural facility should think out some way of opening the conversation, just as chess-players have agreed on several formal openings in their game.

Nothing is easier than to do this, and to do it in such a general manner as will not be ridiculous. It must always be remembered that the most domestic men and women are often the most difficult to rouse into conversation. Their very virtues in home life have dulled their interests in outer things, and the best of mothers have sometimes forgotten to talk about anything except the education of their children. But it is always better worth probing a sound nature than hearing the ready chatter of idleness. For this reason, some serious topic ought to be the best, even for talking with a stranger, since our conversation errs more frequently through frivolity than through gravity.

But it is not the object of this book to give any special directions. They are only useful when framed by each man and woman for their own private use, and any stock proceeding becomes a mere commonplace, and as such contemptible. Yet no intelligent person who thinks over it can fail to make out some general lines to be followed on such occasions, and so thousands of men and women will save themselves from the punishment of a dull and tedious evening beside a person whom they might easily find lively and agreeable.

As there are some people who require to be encouraged by finding out their daily interests,

and inquiring into them, so there are others who are only to be excited by the stimulus of opposition, by suggesting some opinion adverse to what they believe or advocate, and so tempting them to a friendly controversy. If you enter such a controversy with perfectly good temper, with a desire to be convinced by good arguments, and no further interest than to bring out the latent fire in the other person, it may produce a very good conversation. But the moment you find the points of difference too strongly accentuated, the moment you perceive the dissatisfaction which is so common in people who are losing ground, or who feel they are making no impression, you should turn the stream into another channel, in which you anticipate at least partial agreement.

TALKING WITH A FEW

§ 34. These last remarks are very applicable to the case next before us, when a conversation is among a few—say from four to eight people—a form of society the best and most suitable for talk, but which is now rather the exception, from the common habit of crowding our rooms or our tables, and getting rid of social obligations as if they were commercial debts. Indeed many of our young people have so

seldom heard a general conversation that they grow up in the belief that their only duty in society will be to talk to one man or woman at a time. So serious are the results of the fashion of large dinner-parties. For really good society no dinner-table should be too large to exclude general conversation, and no couples should sit together who are likely to lapse into private discourse.

It is generally thought the fault of the host or hostess if such an evening turns out a failure;¹ and indeed it is possible to bring one incongruous person into a small company who will so chill or disturb the rest that conversation languishes. But this case is rare, and the fault usually lies with the company, none of whom take the trouble to tide over any difficulty, or seek to draw out from those present what they like or want to say. I am now looking at the thing from the point of view of the man or woman who comes in as a guest, and whose duty it is to make the evening, or the period of time during which the company is assembled, pass in

¹ It is right to add that there are hosts and hostesses so anxious for the good entertainment of their friends that this preoccupation spoils their own enjoyment, and so far defeats the very object they have in view. But people so truly desirous of giving pleasure can hardly avoid being pleasant in a better sense than those who do not feel their responsibilities so acutely.

a pleasant way. Perhaps it is the practical course to consider the usual form in modern society, that of the small dinner-party, and then apply what is to be said upon it to analogous cases.

In the very forefront there stares us in the face that very awkward period which even the gentle Menander notes as the worst possible for conversation, the short time during which people are assembling, and waiting for the announcement of dinner. If the witty man were not usually a selfish person, who will not exhibit his talent without the reward of full and leisurely appreciation, this is the real moment to show his powers. A brilliant thing said at the very start, which sets people laughing, and makes them forget that they are waiting, may alter the whole complexion of the party, may make the silent and distant people feel themselves drawn into the sympathy of common merriment, and thaw the iciness which so often fetters Anglo-Saxon society. But as this faculty is not given to many, so the average man may content himself with having something ready to tell, and this, if possible, in answer to the usual question expressed or implied: Is there any news this afternoon? There are few days that the daily papers will not afford to the intelligent critic something ridiculous either in style or matter which has escaped

the ordinary public; some local event, nay, even some local tragedy, may suggest a topic not worth more than a few moments of attention, which will secure the interest of minds vacant, and perhaps more hungry to be fed than their bodies. Here then, if anywhere in the whole range of conversation, the man or woman who desires to be agreeable may venture to think beforehand, and bring with them something ready, merely as the first kick or starting point to make the evening run smoothly.

§ 35. When the company has settled down to dinner, the first care should be to prevent it breaking into couples, and for that purpose someone opposite should be addressed or some question asked which may evoke answers from various people. Above all, however, the particular guest of the night, or the person best known as a wit or story-teller, should *not* be pressed or challenged at the outset—a sort of vulgarity which makes him either shy or angry at being so manifestly *exploité* by the company, so that he is likely either to turn silent or say some ill-humoured things.

The main advice to be given to women to help them in making such a small company agreeable, is to study politics. A vast number of clever and well-read women exclude themselves

from a large part of the serious talk of men by neglecting this engrossing and ever-fruitful topic of conversation. Literature, of course, is a still more various and interesting subject; but here perhaps the defect lies with men, who are so devoted to practical life that they lose their taste for general reading. Except for politics, the daily papers seldom afford any literary food fit for good conversation.

The topic which ought to be common to both and always interesting, is the discussion of human character and human motives. If the novel be so popular a form of literature, how can the novel in real life fail to interest an intelligent company? People of serious temper and philosophic habit will be able to confine themselves to large ethical views, and the general dealings of men; but to average people, both men and women, and perhaps most of all to busy men, who desire to find in society relaxation from their toil, that lighter and more personal kind of criticism on human affairs will prevail which is known as *gossip*.

§ 36. This may, therefore, be the suitable moment to consider the place of gossip in the theory of conversation; for though gossip is not only possible but usual in the private discourse of two people, and possible too in a large so-

ciety, its real home and natural exercising ground is the society of a few people intimate with the same surroundings.

It is usual for all people, especially those who most indulge in it, to censure gossip as a crime, as a violation of the Ninth Commandment, as a proof of idleness and vain curiosity, as a frivolous waste of the time given us for mental improvement. Yet the censure is seldom serious. These people cannot but feel obscurely what they are either afraid to speak out or have not duly considered, that the main object of conversation is neither instruction nor moral improvement but *recreation*. It is of course highly desirable that all our amusements should be both intellectually and morally profitable, and we may look back with special satisfaction upon any conversation which included these important objects. But the main and direct object is recreation, mental relaxation, happy idleness; and from this point of view it is impossible for any sound theory of conversation to ignore or depreciate gossip, which is perhaps the main factor in agreeable talk throughout society.

The most harmless form is the repeating of small details about personages great either in position or intellect, which give their empty names a personal colour, and so bring them nearer and

more clearly into view. The man who has just come from the society of kings and queens, or great generals, or politicians, or literary men whose names are exceptionally prominent at the time, can generally furnish some personal details by which people imagine they can explain to themselves great and unexpected results. Who has not heard with interest such anecdotes about Mr. Gladstone, or Prince Bismarck, or Victor Emanuel? And what book has ever acquired more deserved and lasting reputation than Boswell's *Life of Johnson*?

The latest development of the literary side of gossip is to be seen in what are called the "society papers," which owe their circulation to their usefulness in furnishing topics for this kind of conversation.¹ All the funny sketches of life and character which have made *Punch* so admirable a mirror of society, for the last fifty years, are of the character of gossip, subtracting the mischievous element of personality; and though most people will think this latter an essential feature in our meaning when we talk of gossip, it is not so; it is the trivial and passing, the unproven and suspected, which is the main

¹I only speak of the *fact* that they are useful in supplying a want. Whether they are or are not corrupting the public mind is another and a very serious question.

thing, for it is quite possible to bring any story under the notion while suppressing the names of the actors.

Next to the retailing of small personal points about great people comes the narrating of deeper interests belonging to small people, especially the affairs of the heart, which we pursue so assiduously even in feigned characters. But here it is that all the foibles of our neighbours come under survey, and that a great deal of calumny and slander may be launched upon the world by mere shrug and innuendo. The reader will remember with what effect this side of gossip is brought out in Sheridan's *School for Scandal*.

§ 37. It is idle to deny that there is no kind of conversation more fascinating than this, but its immorality may easily become such as to shock honest minds, and the man who indulges in it freely at the expense of others, will probably have to pay the cost himself in the long run; for those who hear him will fear him, and will retire into themselves in his presence. On the other hand, nothing is more honourable than to stand forth as the defender or the palliator of the faults imputed to others, and nothing is easier than to expand such a defence into general considerations as to the purity of human motives, which will raise the conversation from its unwholesome ground into the upper air.

If the company be fit for it, no general rule is more valuable than that of turning the conversation away from people and fixing it on things; but, alas! how many there are who only take interest in people, and in the weakest and most trivial aspects of people! Few things are more essential and more neglected in the education of children than to habituate them to talk about things, and not people; yet, what use is there in urging these more special rules, when the very idea of teaching them to converse at all is foreign to the minds of most parents and of all educators? Let me illustrate this by one grotesque fact.

It will be conceded that the one thing absolutely essential to the education of a lady is that she should talk agreeably at meals. It is the natural meeting time, not only of the household, but of friends, and conversation is then as essential as food. Yet, what is the habit of many of our schools? They either enforce silence at this period, or they compel the wretched pupils to speak in a foreign language, in which they can only labour out spasmodic commonplaces, without any interchange or play of thought. Consequently many of our girls drift into the habit of regarding meal-times as the precise occasion when conversation is impossible. How far this mis-education, during some of the most

critical years of their lives, affects them permanently it is not easy to over-estimate. If parents were decently intelligent in this matter they should ascertain clearly the practice of a school, and the schoolmaster or schoolmistress who is obtuse and mischievous enough to practise this crime should at once lose every pupil.

The only excuse I can find for this widespread outrage upon the social rights of the young, is the old tradition of universities, still pursued in convent schools and Roman Catholic seminaries, that a portion of Scripture, or of some edifying book, should be read out during meals, so that the pupils may take in spiritual food along with their dinners, and avoid the crime of light and trivial conversation. A clever Jesuit educator whom I knew, went so far within the letter of the law as to substitute the *Saturday Review* for the usual work of edification, the *Lives of the Saints!* This worthy man did his best under a system devised to bring up young people in silence, and in fear, not in free and friendly intercourse with their instructors. But why should we, with our spiritual liberty, retain these mischievous and antiquated shackles?

[WITH MANY

§ 38. Conversation with a crowd, or even with a large number of people, is almost a contradiction in terms. How can there be interchange of thought or repartee where so many clashing fancies make confusion rather than harmony? In ordinary society, therefore, it is the obvious solution to break up a large company into couples or small groups, and so reduce this case to one of the preceding. Two exceptional forms may be noted, which come, perhaps, upon the verge of conversation proper: the one where a good story-teller, or person who has had some wonderful experience, is ready to talk for the benefit of the whole company, and receive occasional support from questions put to him by various people. But even in this case the number must be limited, and usually such a talker will seem to his audience egotistical, for people who want to have their little private say, and tell their little modest story, feel ousted by the monopoly of the leading spirit.

Perhaps the pleasantest form into which to lead such a conversation, is a sort of public dialogue, in which one or two querists will draw from the real object of attention his views, or question his statements in such a way as to pro-

voke the exercise of his powers. This is the kind of conversation to be found in Plato's *Dialogues*, which are quite fitted for a large company, though but few speakers share in them. But I will not be bound to admire these immortal compositions as specimens of conversation. To the modern reader, they cease to be such as soon as they become serious, and I may even venture to say that in any modern society they would justly be voted tedious.

§ 39. The second case worth noticing here is when a leading person, king or viceroy, or princess, or political magnate, entertains a crowd of people mostly inferior in station, and has to perform the duty of going through the rooms and talking in succession to all sorts and conditions of men. If on the one hand the people addressed are sure to be flattered by such attention, and therefore responsive and anxious to be pleased, on the other there is no social duty which gives more scope for all the mental and moral perfections already enumerated, and therefore there is no more certain test of conversational ability. For here the talk is not really with many at a time, nor again is it the conversation with one person, in which the main element is the sustaining of interest for a considerable time; it is a series of brief successive

dialogues, in which the two great difficulties of conversation, the starting of it and the breaking off, are perpetually recurring. The speaker is even debarred from the use of any fixed formula or method of overcoming these difficulties, for the people addressed will be sure to compare notes, and will reject as insincere any politenesses which are administered according to a formula, however graceful it may appear.

Here then, if anywhere, the art must consist in concealing the art. But let none imagine that art has no place here. A sympathetic nature, which readily apprehends the interests of other minds, is not more useful to the great man or woman than a careful previous study of the company, who they are, what they have done, what the distinction or the hobby of each of them may be. Nothing is easier than to acquire such information from the staff whose duty is to furnish it. A great natural aptitude or a specially trained memory is required to remember the various scraps of information about each, and to fit them to the proper names. It is said that royal personages often inherit an exceptional power of remembering names and persons from the exercise of this faculty by a long line of successive ancestors. But the suggestion of an equerry or a lord-in-waiting is in such cases the

usual and more obvious cause of this apparent genius, which the flattery of courtiers exaggerates with shameless effrontery.

However this may be, the knowledge, inspired or acquired, of the name and circumstances of an inferior is the great key to smoothing over the difficulty of beginning a conversation, for any personal question will be taken as a compliment, and evidence of a friendly interest on the part of the prince. The breaking off with ease and grace is more difficult, for I do not count the formal bow of dismissal or the prearranged interruption by a new presentation as more than awkward subterfuges. Some form of expressing regret that the moment does not admit of fuller discussion of the subject already commenced, and a hope to resume it, is of course an obvious and polite way of closing the interview, or a question as to someone else who must receive attention, or a complaint that duty must oust pleasure—there are myriad possibilities, as may be seen from the conversation of the few great ladies in England who have the gift or have attained the art. I mention ladies because the traditional bluntness and simplicity inherited, respected, assumed, affected by most Englishmen makes them very averse to this social grace. It is no accident that those of our great houses who have adopted public life after

a considerable experience of French manners, and with a ready knowledge of the French language, are the most brilliant exceptions. Perhaps, too, Irish vivacity has in most of these cases added life and brightness to their talk. But, as a rule, it is to women that we look for this talent, and to older French society for the best examples of it. One often hears it said that since Lady Waldegrave's death no one in London knows how to have a *salon*. This, whether true or false, is the popular recognition of that social excellence in conversing with many, to which I have devoted the last few pages.

THE QUALITY OF THE COMPANY

§ 40. Hitherto we have regarded the company merely from the point of quantity, and considered them as so many units, grouped in larger and smaller masses. We shall now adopt a totally different principle, and regard their *quality* in relation to the speaker. It is obvious that for our purpose this element must receive careful consideration.

I remember years ago occupying myself in constructing from the epitaphs in a country church the genealogy of the great squire who owned the parish. Among the stereotyped and hardly varied eulogies of his ancestors one stood

out as peculiar and original. It was said of this magnate, who died about the year 1830, that to express his virtues among those that knew him would be impertinent, "but to strangers and to posterity let this monument declare, that in him were combined *the generous Patron, the affable Superior, the polished Equal*, the uncompromising Patriot, and the Honest Man." The sequel was commonplace. Nor is the social description complete, for the dignity of the subject would not allow the epitaphist to suggest the virtues of his hero in the guise of an inferior. *The supple courtier* would, from what I have heard about him, have been the truest addition to the picture. But what interests us here is not only the importance given to social talents over morals and religion,—a truly Irish feature,—but the accurate perception the writer had of the various talents required according to the quality of the people around us.

If he had thought more upon the subject, or if he had been allowed to give us the results of his thinking, he might have told us that the secret in all cases, and the *sine qua non* of good conversation, is to establish equality, at least momentary, if you like fictitious, but at all costs *equality*, among the members of the company who make up the party. The man who keeps asserting his superiority, or confessing his in-

feriority, is never agreeable. Nay even, if the superiority is very marked, as in the case of royal persons, it is almost impossible to converse with them in the better sense, and one of the most melancholy penalties of this kind of greatness is, that except within the narrow circle of their families and equals they can never enjoy the fresh breeze of unconstrained society. Any truth they can learn from their surroundings is confined to the very poor category of pleasant truths. All vigorous intellectual buffeting, all wholesome contradiction which would open their minds, is carefully avoided by courtiers, because it is the assertion of this very equality which is the backbone of conversation. It requires peculiar earnestness and honesty on the part of a prince to break through this crust of assentation, and discover the real opinions of the men around him; nor can he incur any bitterer loss than the removal of those rare advisers who have the gift of combining real liberty with formal obsequiousness, and without violating the etiquette of the courtier, can assume the character of the independent critic and just adviser.

But this little book is not meant for the advice or criticism of kings, who by their position are almost completely excluded from conversation. The question before us is how we ordinary people should modify the tone of our talk according

as our company consists of people socially or intellectually above us, of our equals, or lastly, of our inferiors. It is evident that in the first and last cases there is difficulty; the second is the normal atmosphere of conversation.

TALKING WITH SUPERIORS

§ 41. In conversing with superiors, we must broadly distinguish the socially from the intellectually superior. For the art of producing agreeable society in the former case differs widely from doing so in the latter. Perhaps the matter may be expressed tersely, if not quite accurately, by saying that the necessary equality between the members of the company is attained in the former instance by the good talker raising himself to the level of his superior, in the latter by his bringing down his superior to his own level. A word of explanation is here necessary. The man or woman that succeeds among social superiors is not the timid or modest person, afraid to contradict and ever ready to assent to what is said, but rather the free and independent intellect that suggests subjects, makes bold criticisms, and in fact introduces a bright and free tone into a company which is perhaps somewhat dull from its grandeur or even its extreme respectability. It is a case of the socially supe-

rior acknowledging another kind of superiority, which redresses the balance. We need hardly add that the greatest stress must here be placed on tact, for to presume on either kind of superiority will cause offence, and so spoil every attempt at breaking the bonds set around us by the grades of the social hierarchy.

If, on the contrary, we meet a man of acknowledged mental superiority, whether generally or in his special department, it is our social duty by intelligent questioning, by an anxiety to learn from him, to force him to condescend to our ignorance, or join in our fun, till his broader sympathies are awakened, and he plays with us as if we were his children. Indeed this very metaphor points out one of the very remarkable instances of social equality asserted by an inferior—I mean the outspoken freedom of the child—which possesses a peculiar charm, and often thaws the dignity or dissipates the reserve of the great man and woman whose superiority is a perpetual obstacle to them in ordinary society.

I may here dwell a moment upon conscious superiority and its companion, that conscious inferiority which is the great social barrier to conversation, and which in most cases actually prohibits all intercourse. In other European countries the separation of *noblesse* and *bourgeoisie* is carried so far as well-nigh to annihilate

all free and intellectual society of the better kind. The intellectually-educated classes are so thoroughly excluded from social education in the urbanity and grace of noble society, that they sink into mere intellectual boors, while the aristocrats so seldom hear any intellectual discussion or take any interest in learning, that their society becomes either vapidly trivial or professionally narrow. For these nobles have their professions like other people, especially the profession of arms.

The case is not so bad among us, where there are always great commoners, where eminent success in making money, or even in letters, brings men and women into the highest society, and where there are some of the greatest positions in the country from which our Peers are even excluded. There is no doubt that an intellectual man, or a man of strong and recognised character, whatever his origin, can easily take a place in high society among us. But how many lesser people are there of excellent social gifts who assume most falsely that they are not suited, and will not be welcome, to the higher classes, and so avoid both the pleasure and the profit to be derived from a more refined, though not more cultivated, stratum than their own! I am here talking of really modest and worthy people, not of those vain and vulgar persons who make it a

boast—often a very dishonest one—that they have spurned associating with their superiors, from a profound contempt of what they call *toadyism*.

§ 42 This term, which expresses the vicious relations of socially inferior and superior, is used in very vague senses, ranging from a just censure of meanness in others to a mistaken assertion of independence in ourselves. Nothing is more inherent in all European society derived from the feudal and ecclesiastical traditions of the Middle Ages—probably in every cultivated society—than to honour rank and social dignity as such, apart from the real worth of the person so distinguished. This is the basis of that loyalty to sovereigns which even when irrational does not incur the imputation of toadyism. People of independent rank and personal dignity even still accept and prize semimenial offices about a Court, without losing either respect among ordinary people or even self-respect.

There is then such a thing as respect for rank as such, and a feeling of pride in the contact with it, which is regarded as honourable. When does the virtue of loyalty pass into a vice? Clearly when the higher and more important duties of life are postponed to this love of outward dignity. The man who neglects his equals for the purpose of courting his superiors, still

more who confesses or asserts his inferiority when associating with them, and who submits to rebuffs and indignities for the sake of being thought their associate, above all, who condones in them vices which he would not brook in an equal, is justly liable to the charge, which, however, only asserts the exaggeration of a tendency affecting almost all his censors.

The usual thing, however, is to hear people censured for the *fact* of associating with those above them, as if this were in itself a crime. There is, too, not unfrequently an element of jealousy in our criticism, and of secret regret that another has attained certain advantages, or supposed advantages, to which we ourselves feel an equal claim. Yet one thing is certain, that if the supposed toady exhibited in the society which he courts the qualities ascribed to him by his critics, he would very soon lose his position and miss the very object of his ambition. The only cause of his popularity is the very fact that his company feel him in some respects their equal, possibly their superior, and it is the secret of asserting this equality with tact and courtesy which makes men and women popular among their superiors.

There is one point of view which gives a good talker a distinct advantage under these circumstances. The distinctness of his ordinary asso-

ciates from those whom he occasionally meets makes his everyday experience different from theirs, and so things familiar to him and his everyday society are often interesting and novel to people of a different standing. He ought therefore to be able to bring new information to bear upon either class of society, and so secure its interest with his store of fresh experiences.

WITH INFERIORS

§ 43. Let us now turn to the other side and consider the proper principles of conversation with inferiors. And here, too, it is more practical to take our standpoint in the middle class of society, and not among those who must habitually talk to inferiors owing to their own high condition. The same key unlocks the secret of success. If it be indispensable for good conversation to make your superiors feel you for the time their equal, so it is indispensable that your inferiors should feel that they too are upon a social level with you during their talk. Of course, the first thing is to banish all traces of *condescension*, that odious ape of humility and urbanity, which is the loud expression of want of brains and want of tact, for it emphasises the very differences which conversation seeks to obliterate. On the other hand, there is an extreme

of *familiarity* which shocks and alarms the inferior, for he justly expects a sudden revulsion from it, as we are told in Polybius of the common people of Antioch, into whose humble entertainments or amusements Antiochus Epiphanes would come, and sit down to drink and joke with them. These vagaries on the part of their despotic sovran so frightened them that they would get up and run away. The just mean is to strike out a line of conversation, either of common interest, or in which the inferior is a specialist, and therefore your superior. He will then feel that he is speaking with authority, and the honest expression of your ignorance and your desire to learn will give him confidence to tell you freely what he knows.

§ 44. It is in the lower ranks of society that national differences become really great. The highly bred or highly cultivated people of any European nation have attained a certain unity of type, and are interested by the same sort of conversation; it is very different with English, French, Italian, and German peasants, Nay, even within our islands, there is a marked difference in the social abilities of English, Scotch, and Irish peasants. It is customary to set this down to race, and be satisfied with some such vague generality. But I fancy the causes of

these social differences are rather recent than primeval; they do not depend directly upon climate or atmosphere, and if I may quote the opinion of a wise friend on this large question, I should say that one chief cause of the talking or social ability of some peasantries over others is the fact that their proximate ancestors were a bilingual people. Thus the great majority of West Irish and North Scotch peasants are descended from grandfathers whose talk oscillated between Celtic and English, and who were therefore constantly educated in intelligence by the problem of *translating* ideas from one language into another, not to mention the distinct inheritance of the special ideas peculiar to each and every language. This is an education in expression, in thinking, and therefore in conversation, wholly foreign to the English Midland boor, who has never heard more than two or three hundred words of a very rude provincial dialect of English, and therefore commands neither the words nor the ideas of the outlying provinces. A great part of the French peasantry are likewise proximately descended from bilingual ancestors, French being the old language of but a small part of their now recognised territory. Breton, Bearnaise, Provençal, Walloon, are even still living languages in large

parts of France (as was German up to 1871), and so the peasantry were under like favourable conditions.

But I must not diverge further from the subject in hand. Thus much was naturally suggested to me by the best and most diverting conversation I know with inferiors—that which sporting men have with those whose livelihood has been earned by studying the habits and ways of fish and game. There are few men who shoot, fish, or hunt in Ireland, who do not know specimens of that remarkable though small class whose natural ability, combined with long experience, makes them masters of their craft, and whose long association with their superiors in matters of sport has given them perfect ease and even charm of manners. Conversation with these people, which is often prolonged through many hours, is not only very instructive—a secondary matter to us now—but exceedingly amusing, from the perfect frankness as well as tact with which they speak their mind to the sporting friend, whom they regard as their inferior or equal from a professional point of view. It is this perfect liberty, this spiritual equality, often designated as the freemasonry of sport, from which arises the charm of talking upon subjects of common interest to one confessedly inferior in many respects. But in one he is com-

monly your superior, even apart from his sport. It has been far more important to him all his life to study to know the characters of his employers than it has been for them to study his, and so he is generally your superior in perceiving what will please, and what topics are to be selected or avoided in conversation. Nothing has struck me more in many such talks than the acute estimate which these people form of the strength and weakness of those who are their patrons.

These are illustrations of a general kind, to show how inferiority in social station may not imply inferiority for the purposes of conversation, so that we may even here attain that equality which I regard as essential for its success.

THE RELATIONS OF SEX AND AGE

§ 45. So far we have been considering the quality of the company as determined by social position, which, if not an absolutely artificial distinction, is at least frequently such, so that it may be even reversed by circumstances. There are great distinctions made by nature which are indelible, and which must therefore be reckoned with as permanent factors in our theory—I mean those of age and sex.

There are, properly speaking, three grades

of age worth considering—youth, maturity, and old age; but from our point of view we are justified in regarding mature life as the normal state, and shall therefore consider the duties of the mature man and woman as they come in contact with the extremes. It is not worth while writing any advices for the old, as they are beyond the age of improvement, though by no means always stripped of their social qualities; indeed, the position of very old people, who have maintained their faculties, is quite exceptional in modern society, and will require a few words of comment in the present connection.

A collection of very old people is of course hardly to be found; so that the practical case before us is the occurrence of one, or at most two, very old people in a company, and the consequent modifications in ordinary society likely to make this element effective and agreeable. It may almost be assumed that however lively the old person is, he (or she) will not be able to converse when many people are talking in the room, and to assert himself in even a small crowd. There must be comparative silence while he is speaking, and special attention should be paid him. Under these circumstances it almost follows as a matter of course that he should be discreetly drawn out to tell such experiences as are beyond the memory of the rest, which from their

pictures of bygone manners or long dead celebrities are very interesting, and admirably suited for the best social recreation. The many *Recollections, Diaries, Autobiographies*, etc., now published from the papers of the mere observers of their age, such as Greville, and which are generally too trivial and minute to make good books, form the staple of excellent conversation when told by the very actor or observer. Of course there is a considerable chance of his becoming tedious; it is one of the most frequent defects of age, but if a man's hobby makes him tedious, it also makes him very interesting; and the first and best receipt to make a man agreeable is to make him talk about what he likes best.

The most successful conversations with old men are, however, not those with the old *raconteur*, who is in the habit of narrating his experiences and expects to be asked to do so, but with some modest and apparently dull old person who is successfully probed by intelligent and sympathetic questions, till he is actually reminded of long-forgotten scenes, which have perhaps not been suggested to him for years, and then he draws from his memory, with the help of further questions, some passages of life and adventure of the highest interest. Many a time have I seen an old person, at first regarded as an obstacle, prove the highest advantage to the con-

versation, and it is for this reason that in a book of theory the reader should be reminded of his duty to see that so valuable an item does not escape him. It is generally easy enough to gather from the old gentleman (or lady) where he has lived, what society he has frequented, and what are his strongest impressions as to the contrasts between his own early days and ours.

There is, moreover, in discussing the gossip and the scandal of a bygone generation an amount of freedom—I had almost said licence—allowed which would be intolerable as regards living society, and a very old person may be allowed to say things which younger people should avoid. I do not mention this as an advantage in itself—far from it—but as an additional possibility in making conversation lively, and in avoiding that stagnation in talk which, from our present point of view, is the extremest crime known in society.

It is also obvious that as old people are unable to talk loudly and with vivacity, the dialogue between two, or a couple of listeners added to the questioner, will be the most likely way to attain the end in view. To stop an old person who is becoming tedious is probably the most difficult of all social duties, and requires the most delicate tact. The respect due to age takes from our hands those weapons of sarcasm, banter, or even

blunt interruption which are our natural defences against obtrusive youth; nor do I know of any general directions which can help a host or hostess in this grave and not uncommon difficulty. It is of course useless to lecture old people, either in this book or elsewhere, on the dangers of tediousness.

§ 46. I turn now to conversation with people much younger than ourselves, not of course with babies, or very young children, the art of amusing whom can hardly be called the art of conversation. I mean rather such ordinary cases as going in to dinner with a person much younger than yourself, whose main interests must therefore be foreign to yours; or else the entertaining of a party of young people who have met for purposes of sport, but are also to be regarded as guests at a table where conversation asserts its universal importance.

What modifications in our talk are here desirable?

In the first place it is but natural that the older person should lead the discourse, and suggest the topics which will elicit sympathy from the young. And of course the easiest way to begin is to make people talk about themselves—this being a subject which interests most young people exceedingly. But it is by no means a universal rule. The life of the young, of school-

boys, and of young girls, is often very monotonous, and really affords no scope for conversation beyond the first ordinary inquiries into their tastes, habits, and what they read. If you find a strong taste for any special thing, such as music or cricket, you may work out that subject.

But if, as is too often the case, the youth has not thought seriously about anything, it is surely best to draw from your own stores, and tell experiences which will be new and interesting from their curiosity, such as the ways and habits of the lower animals which you may have observed, the manners of men, or of strange cities which you have visited, the feats you have seen performed. These things are seldom suitable for other kinds of society, when any display of your own experience is offensive; but in talking to young, fresh, and ingenuous people, the novelty of the information you give them will generally obscure their critical or fault-finding sense, and even if they are very sceptical as to facts, the young and inexperienced in our day are usually so, they will fully appreciate the effort to make them feel happy.

§ 47. It is perhaps not till then that you will succeed in probing out some interesting nook in their short experience. They have been in accidental contact with some great or notorious person, and have seen him in his leisure mo-

ments; they may have lived in a peculiar country, where either the sport or the natural features are very interesting, and upon which they can have the distinction of instructing older and wiser people.

I have met quiet country gentlemen, who in their youth had seen active service in the army, and fought in remarkable campaigns, who never spoke of these things among their neighbours, so that when some intelligent stranger drew from them their experiences, it came like a revelation to those who for years had voted them stupid and dull members of their county society.

So important and so neglected is this duty of probing for the strong point of others, which is naturally brought forward in connection with the effort to talk with the young and inexperienced, that I am disposed to lay this down as a practical rule: *If you find the company dull, blame yourself.* With more skill and more patience on your part it is almost certain you would have found it agreeable. If even two or three people in a company acted on this rule, how seldom would our social meetings prove a failure!

§ 48. We come now to a still more indelible contrast than that of age, and ask what effects, advantageous or otherwise, has the contrast of sex upon conversation? It is a problem very

difficult indeed to solve, for while it is a great law of nature that the very instincts of each sex urge it to please the other, it is on the contrary a great law of society that (perhaps for this very reason) a large number of topics are not to be discussed by the sexes in common. It is then a case where nature stimulates and tradition restrains: which shall we declare to be stronger? That depends altogether upon the character of the society in which we live. If it be perfectly free—let us say the society of the Navigator Islands—there the natural attraction of opposite sexes must make their conversation far more agreeable than that of men or women separately.

So it is too among those exceptional sets of people in civilised countries, who brave public opinion so far as to speak their minds to the other sex, and whose conversation is accordingly considered too free by the average of people around them. In this it is natural that the more restrained sex should take the initiative; but if any woman makes bold to speak with perfect freedom among men, and if she be gifted with the ordinary talents for conversation, she will be more agreeable than an intelligent man who says the same things—or rather she will say things in a fresher way; the very situation is somewhat piquant, and so she will certainly gain by the con-

trast of sex. A small party of men and women of this sort ought to produce the most amusing conversation possible. But I need only hint how easily such a society may transgress the due limits, and degenerate into what the later Athenians thought brilliant, and collected in a special book. Nor will freedom, far less audacity, in conversation redeem ignorance, rudeness, or graver vices.

Take another kind of society, either one of Puritanical strictness—I remember when the word *girl* was thought rather improper in religious Dublin society, you should say *young person*—or else that sort of foreign society which, from suspicion and fear, prohibits any intimacy between young men and women, or brands such intimacy as foreign to good society. There can be no doubt that here contrast of sex is fatal to conversation, which must needs be constrained, conventional, and occupied with topics either too trivial or too serious for proper recreation. Women living under these conditions find no interest in studying the subjects that interest men—especially politics; and so it comes to pass that in the greater part of orderly modern English society, a company of men only is thought more agreeable than a mixed one—even though the ladies be not so strict as in the extreme cases mentioned, but merely confined to

domestic and moral topics, to the exclusion of public affairs.

§ 49. This being the general aspect of the problem, it only remains to apply the principles already attained in the case of a dialogue with one of the other sex. In old times, that extreme form of courtesy called gallantry was thought the proper way to please a woman. It is now almost vulgar, and the man who desires to flatter an intelligent woman most keenly, and interest her, will take care to treat her as an intellectual equal, not as a plaything or a pet. A man who seizes the opportunity of a conversation to consult a lady on some social difficulty, or make her for the moment his confidante in some matter not to be divulged, will be almost sure to find her agreeable and sympathetic.

Men, especially elderly men, are far more easily flattered by women, and more easily carried away by such flattery. For this reason I think it unnecessary, nay, perhaps mischievous, to give any advices to ladies how to use this powerful engine in society. The real difficulty under which they labour as to conversation is to hit off the right mean between prudery and its opposite, to know how far to speak out frankly, and when to put a bridle on the talker who threatens to overstep the bounds of the reverence due to ourselves and to one another.

This reverence is, of course, due most especially to youth, and elderly people who discuss before young boys and girls any topics not perfectly pure, are guilty of such a crime in conversation as can hardly be punished too severely. Before other elderly people the case is somewhat different, and things may then be said or implied which should not be selected for discussion in the presence of the young. But above all, let us be strict in checking this kind of licence, which is so apt to take possession of the baser minds among us, and degrade conversation—the recreation of intellect and the mirror of social goodness—into a serious mischief.

§ 50. What I have said above concerning the duty of treating the other sex as strict equals in conversation, is but another instance of the principle already laid down (§ 40), that no really bright social intercourse is possible without equality. There is, in fact, nothing so democratic as good conversation, nothing so Protestant, for we must seem to assert our private judgment, even where we assent. And as a man does best to seek a woman's opinion, and ask her advice, so as to make her feel on the same plane, a woman who desires to be agreeable should differ without hesitation from the opinions expressed by men, and assert her independence of judgment, and her consequent right

to take part in a real conversation. A woman who does this, even stupidly, and without good reasons, is better than those who sit down and acquiesce in whatever is said by men; this latter is the acknowledgment of inferiority which is subversive of all pleasant talk.

DEGREES OF INTIMACY

§ 51. The only other classification of the members of a small society worth making here is in accordance with the various degrees of their previous intimacy. They may either be a family party consisting of near relations, or a friendly party consisting of intimate friends, or a party of casual acquaintances who meet not unfrequently, or a chance collection of almost strangers. In all these cases there is naturally some modification to be made in the rules and conditions of agreeable talking. And first of all let us warn those who think it is not worth while taking trouble to talk in their family circle, or who read the newspaper at meals, that they are making a mistake which has far-reaching consequences. It is nearly as bad as those convent schools or ladies' academies, when either silence or a foreign tongue is imposed at meals, and concerning which I have already spoken. Whatever people may think of the

value of theory, there is no doubt whatever that practice is necessary for conversation, and it is at home, among those who are intimate, and free in expressing their thoughts, that this practice must be sought. It is thus, and thus only, that young people can go out into the world properly provided with the only universal introduction to society—agreeable manners.

Here, then, conversation is not so much a recreation as a duty, and so becomes too grave a matter for this book. I will merely say a word upon the position of a guest who is introduced into such a party, to whose daily trifles, family feuds, or friendships, he is a stranger. It is of course the first duty of the family not to monopolise the topics by discussing family histories unknown and uninteresting beyond their circle. Menander long ago complained of the misfortune of falling into a party of this kind.¹ On the other hand, the stranger must assume a temporary interest in affairs outside his ordinary life, and merely for the sake of his hosts. But if he is appealed to as an umpire by members who habitually differ in opinion (and this he will easily note), let him be very wary of giving a decision, and rather discover that there is truth on each side of the question.

§ 52. Far easier is the position of a party

¹ Cf. my *Social Life of Greece*, p. 317.

of intimate friends. They have probably become friends simply because they enjoy each other's society, and have many topics of interest in common. It requires no exertion to make them talk, and they will readily condone moments of taciturnity and depression in one or more members of the party. They want no advice, and need no instruction, for this is the only true and permanent human bond which makes men and women ever sympathetic, and ever agreeable to one another.

§ 53. As regards a company of strangers, on the contrary, all the principles stated in the earlier parts of this book will have their clearest application. To interest or to fascinate a stranger requires all the gifts there enumerated, and in proportion as we possess them, and take pains to use them, we shall succeed in turning the stranger into the friend. There is no greater test of conversational powers than to go into a company of strangers, to make them feel at home, to turn their minds to some common thought, and establish an agreeable and sociable spirit where there was at first nothing but coldness and diffidence. To do this single handed is a feat beyond the power of most people. But if several persons make an effort in the same direction, the combination will effect what a single genius can hardly accomplish.

Nothing proves more conclusively the value of practice in these things than the fact that the higher classes, who are compelled through constant moving about both at home and abroad to converse frequently with casual acquaintances, and who in various society often meet strangers—these are the people in whom we generally observe ease in conversation under such conditions. We set it down to good breeding, but this means that not only they but their ancestors have been practising it. Hereditary virtues have not been created with less labour than any other virtues. Generally they require the efforts of several generations, and are therefore the most arduous and meritorious of all.

THE TOPICS OF CONVERSATION—SERIOUS AND TRIVIAL

§ 54. Having now exhausted the subjective side, that is to say, the qualities in the speaker and the conditions among the hearers which make or mar conversation, it is natural to proceed to the objective side and see how far we can classify the topics which form the matter of our talk. Of course a division of the actual subjects under specific heads would require an encyclopædia, and even then would never be complete, for the very essence of good conver-

sation is to wander through all possible things in heaven, in earth, and under the earth without bond or limit, the only universal condition being that we should range far and near and seek all possible variety, or rather let ourselves drift from point to point, and not determine to hold a fixed course. The quantity, therefore, of subjects being infinite, and so not to be described, we must content ourselves with regarding them in quality as either serious or trivial; in relation to the speakers, as either universal or personal; in the mode of treatment, as handled either in council, in controversy, or in exposition.

§ 55. Our theory has declared itself long ago against over-seriousness in conversation. This caution is specially necessary nowadays,—when people read so many books and work so hard,—lest they should regard conversation as a deliberate method of instruction and channel of improvement. Nay, these very objects will be far better attained indirectly and by the way, while the company is indulging in talk as a recreation.

But it is almost needless to say that the most solid and lasting recreation, the most excellent refreshment of the soul, is to be had from very serious converse, especially where not more than two or three are gathered together, and to exclude this precious comfort from any theory of

conversation would be absurd. On the other hand, when two people are earnestly engaged on a really serious topic, we may leave them to themselves, and need not intrude upon them any idle considerations as to their manner of treating it. For this is not conversation in the proper sense. "In this frame of mind," says Hawthorne in his *Transformation* (chap. ii.), "men sometimes find their profoundest truths side by side with the idlest jest, and utter one or the other, apparently without distinguishing which is the more valuable or assigning any considerable value to either." He hits the truth exactly. Great seriousness is as detrimental to a general talk as excessive trifling. For as the latter fails after a few moments to interest people who have any sense, so the former fails to recreate or amuse, and is in fact earnest work invading the proper domain of leisure.

There is therefore no general direction here possible save to avoid both extremes, or rather to avoid persistence in either extreme, for it is better to have them in turn, than to cultivate subjects which are indifferent. Brilliant talk should alternate between grave and gay, and above all shun dryness, detail, minuteness—in a word, tediousness.

The moment at which by common consent people talk trivialities is the moment of first in-

troductio. And here the weather is almost invariably the first pawn to be moved. It is amazing what triteness and endless repetition is tolerated by society on this point. The facts stated are common property, and agreed to by all, so that the first object of ordinary people seems to be to express nothing while they are saying something. Yet I suppose what is sanctioned by almost universal practice must have some good reason behind it, and is perhaps meant to give people time to observe each other without apparent rudeness. This method of opening the game seems, however, so stale that every sensible person should have some paradox or heresy about the weather ready whereby he may break through this idle skirmishing and make the people about him begin to think as soon as possible. On the other hand it is easy to overdo this attempt, and begin with something so serious that the unprepared audience is frightened and chilled. Thus there can be no greater blunder than to inquire suddenly about the state of a man's soul, a sort of *coup* which many pious people have actually thought a decent introduction to a conversation.

THE TOPICS OF CONVERSATION—GENERAL AND PERSONAL

§ 56. Here we have before us one of the most difficult of problems, and which I shall rather state than attempt to solve. Should we aim at making our conversation universal in subject, or should we prefer it to be on personal topics, such as gossip or scandal—the character of some mutual friend, an enemy, and so forth? There is not the smallest doubt that if we wish it to be profitable and improving, personal topics should be avoided, and that we should talk not about people, but about things. And when an assembly of really cultivated people discusses literary questions, such as the comparative merits of poets or novelists, there is not only great pleasure to be gained from such a society, but the after-taste is good, and you feel that your leisure has not been in vain.

On the other hand, it is idle to deny that in most companies people have not read or thought enough to join in such a conversation or to enjoy it, whereas details of personal life, the latest anecdote, the facts or surmises about some scandal, the adverse criticism of some acquaintance—all this kind of thing, ranging from harmless gossip into libellous scandal, is deeply

interesting to almost everybody, and though by no means improving is always entertaining.

But even so let the scandalmonger beware. If his ordinary topics are the characters of his acquaintances, he will soon find himself shunned or treated with suspicion by society; and nothing so completely kills all the pleasure of a company as a protest from anyone present that he will not have his absent friend maligned, and that he denies the truth of what has just been said. To apologise to him for the statement or to resist him with argument is equally fatal, for the whole ease and good temper required for pleasant talk has vanished for that occasion.

§ 57. For this reason, unless the talk consists of confidences between two people who thoroughly understand one another, in which case I hold personal topics to be far the easiest and the most agreeable, it should be our duty to raise if possible the gossip about individuals into reflections upon classes or even principles. Thus if a young lady tells you that such a man is conceited, you may raise the question how far conceit is excusable, or whether it may not be commendable, whether it means a false estimate of poor endowments or a just estimate of considerable attainments, and so forth. Or else you may inquire whether men or women are the more conceited as a rule, and whether Aristotle

was not right in setting down over-bashfulness as a vice. Beginning then with the characters of individuals, which is the easiest prologue, and in which somebody will always be ready to start, disengage the general or common feature, and you will not only avoid personalities, but enable those who have no knowledge and interest about the person described to join in the broader discussion of social ethics. And let it not be imagined that because these things have been discussed millions of times they are therefore trite and dull. Just as each succeeding philosopher insists on thinking out again for himself what seems to have been thoroughly exhausted by his predecessors, so every member of society thinks himself capable of deciding over again upon questions which have been settled by thousands of other people to their own satisfaction.

I said just now that when two people only are conversing, personal topics are most suitable, and of all these the confessions of either to the other are the best. In the first place nothing is so agreeable to most men as to have their own history the object of sympathy, and that is the meaning of the trite adage: Talk to people about themselves, and not about yourself. And again, nothing can be more fascinating than genuine autobiography—I mean confessions of human experience not set down for the public,

not trussed and cooked for their use, but the real outspeaking of a human heart. This it is which makes autobiographies so popular as books, though as soon as anyone begins to confess to the public, all the real depth and intimacy of his experience vanishes, generally to make way for exhibitions of morbid vanity. It is only one man in a million who has the modesty and the shamelessness, the innocence and the impudence to unveil all his real life to the world of strangers.¹

TOPICS OF CONVERSATION—MODES OF TREATMENT

§ 57. For this reason, unless the talk mode in which all subjects may be treated, just as the old rhetoricians divided the various modes of oratory; for, as we said at the outset, conversation may be in theory regarded as informal rhetoric. The old division, then, of orations was based on the form which the company of hearers and speakers assumed. Was it a deliberative assembly, which sat in conclave, as it were, to find out the truth or the right thing to do upon an open question? Then the proper

¹I may cite the autobiographies of Benvenuto Cellini and of Alfieri in their complete Italian form as the most real, if not the only real, specimens I know.

form of eloquence was the *Deliberative*, that of the Senate-house or Parliament suggesting arguments with gravity and modesty,¹ receiving with deference and attention the views of others, stimulating all to give their opinions. Was it a judicial court, where the question was a dispute, and the speakers had their line determined as plaintiffs or defendants? Then the form was the *Controversial*, in which each side was bound to make the best of its own case, and the worst of the adversary's; in which each speaker was to bid for the favour of the court, and only limit the violence of his invective by the fear of alienating the judges of the case, and so defeating the object he had in view. Lastly, was the meeting one which merely came together to be impressed or amused by the display of a single speaker, to whom the topic was prescribed, and whose duty it was to excite the emotions and enlist the sympathy of his hearers? Then the proper form was the *Florid*, or *Epideictic*, as they called it, where display was the object, where pomp and ornament were in their proper place.

§ 59. These distinctions are with reasonable reservation clearly applicable to conversation. The best kind is when the subject is discussed

¹ I need hardly say that the present Houses of Parliament in England and elsewhere, if we except the House of Lords, will not serve as specimens.

by the company as if at an informal council, in which each member gives his opinion, and contributes something to the common stock; where each is not only listened to in turn, but is expected to speak, and where the variety of views and of the expression of them constitutes the very charm of the company. The more people succeed in adopting this form of discussion, the more successful their society will be. The most perfect host and hostess are those who induce all their guests to talk, and elicit even from the silent and the bashful some stray flash of intelligence, which gives additional flavour to the spiritual repast.

It may happen, however, that the topic is taken up by two leading minds in the company, and discussed as a controversy, each putting forth his strength to wrestle with his friendly adversary. Then it may be desirable for the rest to take sides in sympathy, and encourage the conflict of wit or argument. This sort of society may be exceedingly pleasant, provided the disputants keep their temper, and provided they do not monopolise too great a share of the time and attention of the rest. There is hardly a company which will not tire of the discussion of a single subject, however important or interesting. Nevertheless the controversial form is distinctly an agreeable and often highly instruc-

tive form of conversation, and many a society of ordinary people attain to the enjoyment of an excellent evening by encouraging two leading spirits to show their powers.

The same good result may be obtained when the company comes together for the purpose of hearing some remarkable person, who is held out as the attraction of the party. It is not conversation, in any real sense, unless it stimulates others to speak; but still we must include in our survey those cases where the funny man, or the Arctic traveller, or the superannuated detective, or the escaped nihilist, undertakes to tell his experiences, and delight us with "real fiction." This is truly the epideictic or *show-off* style, in which the solitary speaker is supposed to delight and display himself without a rival, or with a rival silenced before him. Indeed, it is matter of common remark that two or three such talkers are apt to neutralise one another and produce no effect. Each is supposed to be afraid of the other, or jealous of the other, and so wanting in that spontaneity or *abandon* only attained in a congenial atmosphere. This is not my experience of Irish wits, of whom a wise English friend often remarked to me: There is no use in asking one Irishman to dinner; you must ask another to draw him out.

EPILOGUE

§ 60. The theory of conversation here attempted seems to be completely contained in the foregoing paragraphs, so far as the author has been able to investigate it. No doubt many of his readers will wonder that a subject so interesting can be made so dry, and will complain (in spite of § 5) that he has not given at least a few specimens of what he approves. If he is unable to compose them, why not cull them from the best novel literature of the day? It is, of course, quite easy to give such examples, which can be found in thousands from the comedies of Sheridan to the stories of Lever—who was himself, like Sheridan, a great master of conversation. But who ever profited directly in his own conversation by reading conversations? Who could ever transfer to ordinary intercourse the imaginary dialogues of romance? They may be elaborate and studied, like those of Walter Scott's heroines, and indeed the lovers' dialogues of almost all novelists; or they may be perfectly natural and easy, like those of Charles Lever just referred to. But in either case they are stereotyped in their book, and are useless even as models. One may quote from them an occasional brilliant or foolish remark, as one may from any book, but that is all.

There is always this difficulty about any practice which has never been reduced to rule, that the laws of it, when set forth in order, seem trivial and dull; nor will the student believe that such valuable and complicated results can be derived from mere truisms. We are quite accustomed to that surprise in the case of logic. The whole system of human reasoning in all its wonderful intricacy is built up from a few general principles in themselves perfectly and necessarily obvious, just as the prose of Ruskin and the poetry of Browning are expressed in combinations of twenty-six letters. But as in this case the theory of composing words is easy enough, and yet the art a mystery, which only very few can ever attain in perfection,—each, too, after his own fashion, and stamped with his own genius,—so the theory of conversation may be reduced to a small number of general observations, and yet the perfect practice of it is a mystery, which defies analysis—one of the myriad manifestations of human genius which all can admire, but no one can ever explain.

JONATHAN SWIFT
HINTS TOWARDS AN ESSAY ON CON-
VERSATION
AND
GENTEEL AND INGENIOUS CONVER-
SATION

HINTS TOWARDS AN ESSAY ON CON- VERSATION

I HAVE observed few obvious subjects to have been so seldom, or at least so slightly, handled as this; and, indeed, I know few so difficult to be treated as it ought, nor yet upon which there seems so much to be said.

Most things pursued by men for the happiness of public or private life, our wit or folly have so refined, that they seldom subsist but in idea; a true friend, a good marriage, a perfect form of government, with some others, require so many ingredients, so good in their several kinds, and so much niceness in mixing them, that for some thousands of years men have despaired of reducing their schemes to perfection: but in conversation it is, or might be, otherwise; for here we are only to avoid a multitude of errors, which, although a matter of some difficulty, may be in every man's power, for want of which it remains as mere an idea as the other. Therefore it seems to me, that the truest way to understand conversation, is to know the faults and errors to which it is subject, and from thence every man to form maxims to himself whereby

it may be regulated, because it requires few talents to which most men are not born, or at least may not acquire, without any great genius or study. For nature has left every man a capacity of being agreeable, though not of shining in company; and there are a hundred men sufficiently qualified for both, who, by a very few faults that they might correct in half an hour, are not so much as tolerable.

I was prompted to write my thoughts upon this subject by mere indignation, to reflect that so useful and innocent a pleasure, so fitted for every period and condition of life, and so much in all men's power, should be so much neglected and abused.

And in this discourse it will be necessary to note those errors that are obvious, as well as others which are seldomer observed, since there are few so obvious, or acknowledged, into which most men, some time or other, are not apt to run.

For instance: nothing is more generally exploded than the folly of talking too much; yet I rarely remember to have seen five people together, where some one among them had not been predominant in that kind, to the great constraint and disgust of all the rest. But among such as deal in multitudes of words, none are comparable to the sober, deliberate talker, who

proceeds with much thought and caution, makes his preface, branches out into several digressions, finds a hint that puts him in mind of another story, which he promises to tell you when this is done; comes back regularly to his subject, cannot readily call to mind some person's name, holding his head, complains of his memory; the whole company all this while in suspense; at length says, it is no matter, and so goes on. And, to crown the business, it perhaps proves at last a story the company has heard fifty times before; or, at best, some insipid adventure of the relater.

Another general fault in conversation is that of those who affect to talk of themselves: some, without any ceremony, will run over the history of their lives; will relate the annals of their diseases, with the several symptoms and circumstances of them; will enumerate the hardships and injustice they have suffered in court, in parliament, in love, or in law. Others are more dexterous, and with great art will lie on the watch to hook in their own praise: they will call a witness to remember they always foretold what would happen in such a case, but none would believe them; they advised such a man from the beginning, and told him the consequences, just as they happened; but he would have his own way. Others make a vanity of telling their

faults; they are the strangest men in the world; they cannot dissemble; they own it is a folly; they have lost abundance of advantages by it; but if you would give them the world, they cannot help it; there is something in their nature that abhors insincerity and constraint; with many other insufferable topics of the same altitude.

Of such mighty importance every man is to himself, and ready to think he is so to others; without once making this easy and obvious reflection, that his affairs can have no more weight with other men, than theirs have with him; and how little that is he is sensible enough.

Where a company has met, I often have observed two persons discover, by some accident, that they were bred together at the same school or university; after which the rest are condemned to silence, and to listen while these two are refreshing each other's memory with the arch tricks and passages of themselves and their comrades.

I know a great officer of the army who will sit for some time with a supercilious and impatient silence, full of anger and contempt for those who are talking; at length, of a sudden, demanding audience, decide the matter in a short dogmatical way; then withdraw within himself again, and vouchsafe to talk no more,



After the painting by Menzel.

Frederick the Great's Round Table at Sans Souci.

until his spirits circulate again to the same point.

There are some faults in conversation which none are so subject to as the men of wit, nor ever so much as when they are with each other. If they have opened their mouths without endeavouring to say a witty thing, they think it is so many words lost; it is a torment to the hearers, as much as to themselves, to see them upon the rack for invention, and in perpetual constraint, with so little success. They must do something extraordinary in order to acquit themselves, and answer their character, else the standers-by may be disappointed, and be apt to think them only like the rest of mortals. I have known two men of wit industriously brought together in order to entertain the company, where they have made a very ridiculous figure, and provided all the mirth at their own expense.

I know a man of wit who is never easy but where he can be allowed to dictate and preside: he neither expects to be informed nor entertained, but to display his own talents. His business is to be good company, and not good conversation; and therefore he chooses to frequent those who are content to listen, and profess themselves his admirers. And, indeed, the worst conversation I ever remember to have heard in my life was that at Will's coffee-house, where the wits (as they were called) used formerly to assemble;

that is to say, five or six men who had writ plays, or at least prologues, or had share in a miscellany, came thither, and entertained one another with their trifling composures, in so important an air as if they had been the noblest efforts of human nature, or that the fate of kingdoms depended on them; and they were usually attended with an humble audience of young students from the inns of court, or the universities; who, at due distance, listened to these oracles, and returned home with great contempt for their law and philosophy, their heads filled with trash, under the name of politeness, criticism, and belles lettres.

By these means the poets, for many years past, were all overrun with pedantry. For, as I take it, the word is not properly used; because pedantry is the too frequent or unreasonable obtruding our own knowledge in common discourse, and placing too great a value upon it; by which definition, men of the court, or the army, may be as guilty of pedantry as a philosopher or a divine; and it is the same vice in women, when they are over copious upon the subject of their petticoats, or their fans, or their china. For which reason, although it be a piece of prudence, as well as good manners, to put men upon talking on subjects they are best versed in, yet that is a liberty a wise man could hardly take; be-

cause, besides the imputation of pedantry, it is what he would never improve by.

The great town is usually provided with some player, mimic, or buffoon, who has a general reception at the good tables; familiar and domestic with persons of the first quality, and usually sent for at every meeting to divert the company; against which I have no objection. You go there as to a farce or a puppet-show; your business is only to laugh in season, either out of inclination or civility, while this merry companion is acting his part. It is a business he has undertaken, and we are to suppose he is paid for his day's work. I only quarrel, when, in select and private meetings, where men of wit and learning are invited to pass an evening, this jester should be admitted to run over his circle of tricks, and make the whole company unfit for any other conversation, beside the indignity of confounding men's talents at so shameful a rate.

Raillery is the finest part of conversation; but, as it is our usual custom to counterfeit and adulterate whatever is too dear for us, so we have done with this, and turned it all into what is generally called repartee, or being smart, just as when an expensive fashion comes up, those who are not able to reach it content themselves with some paltry imitation. It now passes for raillery to run a man down in discourse, to put

him out of countenance, and make him ridiculous; some times to expose the defects of his person or understanding; on all which occasions, he is obliged not to be angry, to avoid the imputation of not being able to take a jest. It is admirable to observe one who is dexterous at this art, singling out a weak adversary, getting the laugh on his side, and then carrying all before him. The French, from whence we borrow the word, have a quite different idea of the thing, and so had we in the politer age of our fathers. Raillery was to say something that at first appeared a reproach or reflection, but, by some turn of wit, unexpected and surprising, ended always in a compliment, and to the advantage of the person it was addressed to. And surely one of the best rules in conversation is, never to say a thing which any of the company can reasonably wish we had rather left unsaid: nor can there anything be well more contrary to the ends for which people meet together, than to part unsatisfied with each other or themselves.

There are two faults in conversation, which appear very different, yet arise from the same root, and are equally blameable; I mean an impatience to interrupt others; and the uneasiness of being interrupted ourselves. The two chief ends of conversation are to entertain and improve those we are among, or to receive those

benefits ourselves; which whoever will consider, cannot easily run into either of these two errors; because, when any man speaks in company, it is to be supposed he does it for his hearers' sake, and not his own; so that common discretion will teach us not to force their attention, if they are not willing to lend it; nor, on the other side, to interrupt him who is in possession, because that is in the grossest manner to give the preference to our own good sense.

There are some people whose good manners will not suffer them to interrupt you, but, what is almost as bad, will discover abundance of impatience, and lie upon the watch until you have done, because they have started something in their own thoughts, which they long to be delivered of. Meantime, they are so far from regarding what passes, that their imaginations are wholly turned upon what they have in reserve, for fear it should slip out of their memory; and thus they confine their invention, which might otherwise range over a hundred things full as good, and that might be much more naturally introduced.

There is a sort of rude familiarity, which some people, by practising among their intimates, have introduced into their general conversation, and would have it pass for innocent freedom or humour; which is a dangerous ex-

periment in our northern climate, where all the little decorum and politeness we have are purely forced by art, and are so ready to lapse into barbarity. This, among the Romans, was the railery of slaves, of which we have many instances in Plautus. It seems to have been introduced among us by Cromwell, who, by preferring the scum of the people, made it a court entertainment, of which I have heard many particulars; and, considering all things were turned upside down, it was reasonable and judicious; although it was a piece of policy found out to ridicule a point of honour in the other extreme, when the smallest word misplaced among gentlemen ended in a duel.

There are some men excellent at telling a story, and provided with a plentiful stock of them, which they can draw out upon occasion in all companies; and, considering how low conversation runs now among us, it is not altogether a contemptible talent; however, it is subject to two unavoidable defects, frequent repetition, and being soon exhausted; so, that, whoever values this gift in himself, has need of a good memory, and ought frequently to shift his company, that he may not discover the weakness of his fund; for those who are thus endued have seldom any other revenue, but live upon the main stock.

Great speakers in public are seldom agreeable in private conversation, whether their faculty be natural, or acquired by practice, and often venturing. Natural elocution, although it may seem a paradox, usually springs from a barrenness of invention, and of words; by which men who have only one stock of notions upon every subject, and one set of phrases to express them in, they swim upon the superficies, and offer themselves on every occasion; therefore men of learning, and who know the compass of a language, are generally the worst talkers on a sudden, until much practice has inured and emboldened them; because they are confounded with plenty of matter, variety of notions and of words, which they cannot readily choose, but are perplexed and entangled by too great a choice; which is no disadvantage in private conversation; where, on the other side, the talent of haranguing is, of all others, most unsupportable.

Nothing has spoiled men more for conversation than the character of being wits; to support which they never fail of encouraging a number of followers and admirers, who list themselves in their service, wherein they find their accounts on both sides by pleasing their mutual vanity. This has given the former such an air of superiority, and made the latter so pragmatical, that neither of them are well to be

endured. I say nothing here of the itch of dispute and contradiction, telling of lies, or of those who are troubled with the disease called the wandering of the thoughts, so that they are never present in mind at what passes in discourse; for whoever labours under any of these possessions, is as unfit for conversation as a madman in Bedlam.

I think I have gone over most of the errors in conversation that have fallen under my notice or memory, except some that are merely personal, and others too gross to need exploding; such as lewd or profane talk; but I pretend only to treat the errors of conversation in general, and not the several subjects of discourse, which would be infinite. Thus we see how human nature is most debased, by the abuse of that faculty which is held the great distinction between men and brutes: and how little advantage we make of that, which might be the greatest, the most lasting, and the most innocent, as well as useful pleasure of life: in default of which we are forced to take up with those poor amusements of dress and visiting, or the more pernicious ones of play, drink, and vicious amours; whereby the nobility and gentry of both sexes are entirely corrupted, both in body and mind, and have lost all notions of love, honour, friendship, gener-

osity: which, under the name of fopperies, have been for some time laughed out of doors.

[This degeneracy of conversation, with the pernicious consequences thereof upon our humours and dispositions, has been owing, among other causes, to the custom arisen, for some time past, of excluding women from any share in our society, further than in parties at play, or dancing, or in the pursuit of an amour. I take the highest period of politeness in England (and it is of the same date in France) to have been the peaceable part of king Charles I.'s reign, and from what we read of those times, as well as from the accounts I have formerly met with from some who lived in that court, the methods then used for raising and cultivating conversation were altogether different from ours: several ladies, whom we find celebrated by the poets of that age, had assemblies at their houses, where persons of the best understanding, and of both sexes, met to pass the evenings in discoursing upon whatever agreeable subjects were occasionally started; and although we are apt to ridicule the sublime Platonic notions they had, or personated, in love and friendship, I conceive their refinements were grounded upon reason, and that a little grain of the romance is no ill ingredient to preserve and exalt the dignity of

human nature, without which it is apt to degenerate into everything that is sordid, vicious, and low. If there were no other use in the conversation of ladies, it is sufficient that it would lay a restraint upon those odious topics of immodesty and indecencies, into which the rudeness of our northern genius is so apt to fall. And, therefore, it is observable in those sprightly gentlemen about the town, who are so very dexterous at entertaining a vizard mask in the park or the playhouse, that in the company of ladies of virtue and honour, they are silent and disconcerted, and out of their element.

There are some people who think they sufficiently acquit themselves, and entertain their company, with relating facts of no consequence, nor at all out of the road of such common incidents as happen every day; and this I have observed more frequently among the Scots than any other nation, who are very careful not to omit the minutest circumstances of time or place; which kind of discourse, if it were not a little relieved by the uncouth terms and phrases, as well as accent and gesture peculiar to that country, would be hardly tolerable. It is not a fault in company to talk much; but to continue it long is certainly one; for, if the majority of those who are got together be naturally silent or

cautious, the conversation will flag, unless it be often renewed by one among them, who can start new subjects, provided he does not dwell upon them, that leave room for answers and replies.

A COMPLETE COLLECTION OF GEN-
TEEL AND INGENIOUS CON-
VERSATION.

ACCORDING TO THE MOST POLITE MODE AND
METHOD, NOW USED AT COURT, AND IN
THE BEST COMPANIES OF ENGLAND
IN THREE DIALOGUES.

BY SIMON WAGSTAFF, ESQ.

INTRODUCTION

AS my life has been chiefly spent in consulting the honor and welfare of my country for more than forty years past, not without answerable success, if the world and my friends have not flattered me, so there is no point wherein I have so much labored as that of improving and polishing all parts of conversation between persons of quality, whether they meet by accident or invitation, at meals, tea, or visits, mornings, noon, or evenings.

I have passed perhaps more time than any other man of my age and country in visits and assemblies, where the polite persons of both sexes distinguish themselves; and could not with-

out much grief observe how frequently both gentlemen and ladies are at a loss for questions, answers, replies, and rejoinders. However, my concern was much abated when I found that these defects were not occasioned by any want of materials but because those materials were not in every hand: for instance, one lady can give an answer better than ask a question: one gentleman is happy at a reply; another excels in a rejoinder: one can revive a languishing conversation by a sudden surprising sentence; another is more dexterous in seconding; a third can fill up the gap with laughing, or commending what has been said: thus fresh hints may be started, and the ball of the discourse kept up.

But, alas! this is too seldom the case, even in the most select companies. How often do we see at court, at public visiting days, at great men's levees, and other places of general meeting, that the conversation falls and drops to nothing, like a fire without supply of fuel! This is what we all ought to lament; and against this dangerous evil I take upon me to affirm, that I have in the following papers provided an infallible remedy:—

It was in the year 1695, and the sixth of his late majesty king William III., of ever-glorious and immortal memory, who rescued three king-

doms from popery and slavery, when, being about the age of six-and-thirty, my judgment mature, of good reputation in the world, and well acquainted with the best families in town, I determined to spend five mornings, to dine four times, pass three afternoons, and six evenings every week in the houses of the most polite families, of which I would confine myself to fifty; only changing as the masters or ladies died, or left the town, or grew out of vogue, or sunk in their fortunes, or (which to me was of the highest moment) became disaffected to the government; which practice I have followed ever since to this very day; except when I happened to be sick, or in the spleen upon cloudy weather; and except when I entertained four of each sex at my own lodgings once in a month, by way of retaliation.

I always kept a large table-book in my pocket; and as soon as I left the company I immediately entered the choicest expressions that passed during the visit; which, returning home, I transcribed in a fair hand, but somewhat enlarged; and had made the greatest part of my collection in twelve years; but not digested into any method, for this I found was a work of infinite labor, and what required the nicest judgment, and consequently could not be brought to any degree of perfection in less than sixteen years more.

Herein I resolved to exceed the advice of Horace, a Roman poet, which I have read in Mr. Creech's admirable translation, that an author should keep his works nine years in his closet before he ventured to publish them: and, finding that I still received some additional flowers of wit and language, although in a very small number, I determined to defer the publication, to pursue my design, and exhaust (if possible) the whole subject, that I might present a complete system to the world: for I am convinced, by long experience, that the critics will be as severe as their old envy against me can make them: I foresee they will object, that I have inserted many answers and replies, which are neither witty, humorous, polite, nor authentic; and have omitted others that would have been highly useful, as well as entertaining. But let them come to particulars, and I will boldly engage to confute their malice.

For these last six or seven years I have not been able to add above nine valuable sentences to enrich my collection: from whence I conclude that what remains will amount only to a trifle. However, if, after the publication of this work, any lady or gentleman, when they have read it, shall find the least thing of importance omitted, I desire they will please to supply my defects by communicating to me their discoveries; and

their letters may be directed to Simon Wagstaff, Esq., at his lodgings next door to the Gloucester-head in St. James's Street, paying the postage. In return of which favor, I shall make honorable mention of their names in a short preface to the second edition.

In the mean time, I cannot but with some pride and much pleasure congratulate with my dear country, which has outdone all the nations of Europe, in advancing the whole art of conversation to the greatest height it is capable of reaching; and, therefore, being entirely convinced that the collection I now offer to the public is full and complete, I may at the same time boldly affirm, that the whole genius, humor, politeness, and eloquence of England are summed up in it; nor is the treasure small, wherein are to be found at least a thousand shining questions, answers, repartees, replies, and rejoinders, fitted to adorn every kind of discourse that an assembly of English ladies and gentlemen, met together for their mutual entertainment, can possibly want: especially when the several flowers shall be set off and improved by the speakers, with every circumstance of preface and circumlocution, in proper terms; and attended with praise, laughter, or admiration.

There is a natural involuntary distortion of the muscles, which is the anatomical cause of

laughter; but there is another cause of laughter, which decency requires, and is the undoubted mark of a good taste, as well as of a polite obliging behavior; neither is this to be acquired without much observation, long practice, and sound judgment; I did therefore once intend, for the ease of the learner, to set down, in all parts of the following dialogues, certain marks, asterisks, or *nota benes* (in English, mark-wells) after most questions, and every reply or answer; directing exactly the moment when one, two, or all the company are to laugh: but, having duly considered that this expedient would too much enlarge the bulk of the volume, and consequently the price; and likewise that something ought to be left for ingenious readers to find out, I have determined to leave that whole affair, although of great importance, to their own discretion.

The reader must learn by all means to distinguish between proverbs and those polite speeches which beautify conversation; for, as to the former, I utterly reject them out of all ingenious discourse. I acknowledge, indeed, that there may possibly be found in this treatise a few sayings, among so great a number of smart turns of wit and humor as I have produced, which have a proverbial air; however, I hope it will be considered that even these were not originally

proverbs, but the genuine productions of superior wits, to embellish and support conversation; whence, with great impropriety as well as plagiarism (if you will forgive a hard word), they have most injuriously been transferred into proverbial maxims; and therefore, in justice, ought to be resumed out of vulgar hands, to adorn the drawing-rooms of princes both male and female, the levees of great ministers, as well as the toilet and tea-table of the ladies.

I can faithfully assure the reader that there is not one single witty phrase in this whole collection which has not received the stamp and approbation of at least one hundred years, and how much longer it is hard to determine; he may therefore be secure to find them all genuine, sterling, and authentic.

But, before this elaborate treatise can become of universal use and ornament to my native country, two points, that will require much time and much application, are absolutely necessary.

For, first, whatever person would aspire to be completely witty, smart, humorous, and polite, must, by hard labor, be able to retain in his memory every single sentence contained in this work, so as never to be once at a loss in applying the right answers, questions, repartees, and the like immediately, and without study or hesitation.

And, secondly, after a lady or gentleman has so well overcome this difficulty as never to be at a loss upon any emergency, the true management of every feature, and almost of every limb, is equally necessary; without which an infinite number of absurdities will inevitably ensue. For instance, there is hardly a polite sentence in the following dialogues which does not absolutely require some peculiar graceful motion in the eyes, or nose, or mouth, or forehead, or chin, or suitable toss of the head, with certain offices assigned to each hand; and in ladies, the whole exercise of the fan, fitted to the energy of every word they deliver; by no means omitting the various turns and cadence of the voice, the twistings, and movements, and different postures of the body, the several kinds and gradations of laughter, which the ladies must daily practice by the looking-glass, and consult upon them with their waiting-maids.

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I am far from desiring or expecting that all the polite and ingenious speeches contained in this work should, in the general conversation between ladies and gentlemen, come in so quick and so close as I have here delivered them. By no means: on the contrary, they ought to be husbanded better, and spread much thinner. Nor do I make the least question but that, by a dis-

creet and thrifty management, they may serve for the entertainment of a whole year to any person who does not make too long, or too frequent, visits in the same family. The flowers of wit, fancy, wisdom, humor, and politeness, scattered in this volume, amount to one thousand seventy and four. Allowing, then, to every gentleman and lady thirty visiting families (not insisting upon fractions), there will want but a little of a hundred polite questions, answers, replies, rejoinders, repartees, and remarks, to be daily delivered fresh in every company for twelve solar months; and even this is a higher pitch of delicacy than the world insists on, or has reason to expect. But I am altogether for exalting this science to its utmost perfection.

It may be objected that the publication of my book may, in a long course of time, prostitute this noble art to mean and vulgar people; but I answer, that it is not so easy an acquirement as a few ignorant pretenders may imagine. A footman may swear, but he cannot swear like a lord. He can swear as often, but can he swear with equal delicacy, propriety, and judgment? No, certainly, unless he be a lad of superior parts, of good memory, a diligent observer, one who has a skilful ear, some knowledge in music, and an exact taste, which hardly fall to the share of one in a thousand among that fraternity, in as

high favor as they now stand with their ladies. Neither has one footman in six so fine a genius as to relish and apply those exalted sentences comprised in this volume which I offer to the world. It is true, I cannot see that the same ill consequences would follow from the waiting-woman, who, if she had been bred to read romances, may have some small subaltern or second-hand politeness; and if she constantly attends the tea, and be a good listener, may, in some years, make a tolerable figure, which will serve, perhaps, to draw in the young chaplain or the old steward. But, alas! after all, how can she acquire those hundred graces, and motions, and airs, the whole military management of the fan, the contortions of every muscular motion in the face, the risings and fallings, the quickness and slowness of the voice, with the several turns and cadences; the proper juncture of smiling and frowning, how often and how loud to laugh, when to gibe and when to flout, with all the other branches of doctrine and discipline above recited?

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I am, therefore, not under the least apprehension that this art will ever be in danger of falling into common hands, which requires so much time, study, practice, and genius, before it arrives at perfection; and, therefore, I must re-

peat my proposal for erecting public schools, provided with the best and ablest masters and mistresses, at the charge of the nation. . . .

I am heartily sorry, and was much disappointed to find, that so universal and polite an entertainment as cards, has hitherto contributed very little to the enlargement of my work. I have sat by many hundred times with the utmost vigilance, and my table-book ready, without being able, in eight hours, to gather matter for one single phrase in my book. But this, I think, may be easily accounted for, by the turbulence and justling of passions, upon the various and surprising turns, incidents, revolutions, and events of good and evil fortune, that arrive in the course of a long evening at play; the mind being wholly taken up, and the consequences of non-attention so fatal.

Play is supported upon the two great pillars of deliberation and action. The terms of art are few, prescribed by law and custom; no time allowed for digressions or trials of wit. Quadrille, in particular, bears some resemblance to a state of nature, which, we are told, is a state of war, wherein every woman is against every woman; the unions short, inconstant, and soon broke; the league made this minute without knowing the ally, and dissolved in the next. Thus, at the game of quadrille, female brains

are always employed in stratagem, or their hands in action. Neither can I find that our art has gained much by the happy revival of masquerading among us; the whole dialogue in those meetings being summed up in one (sprightly, I confess, but) single question, and as sprightly an answer. "Do you know me?" "Yes, I do." And, "Do you know me?" "Yes, I do." For this reason I did not think it proper to give my readers the trouble of introducing a masquerade, merely for the sake of a single question, and a single answer; especially when, to perform this in a proper manner, I must have brought in a hundred persons together of both sexes, dressed in fantastic habits for one minute, and dismiss them the next.

Neither is it reasonable to conceive that our science can be much improved by masquerades, where the wit of both sexes is altogether taken up in contriving singular and humorous disguises; and their thoughts entirely employed in bringing intrigues and assignations of gallantry to a happy conclusion.

The judicious reader will readily discover that I make Miss Notable my heroine, and Mr. Thomas Neverout my hero. I have labored both their characters with my utmost ability. It is into their mouths that I have put the liveliest questions, answers, repartees, and rejoinders, be-

cause my design was, to propose them both as patterns for all young bachelors and single ladies to copy after. By which I hope very soon to see polite conversation flourish between both sexes, in a more consummate degree of perfection than these kingdoms have ever yet known.

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The reader will find that the following collection of polite expressions will easily incorporate with all subjects of genteel and fashionable life. Those which are proper for morning tea will be equally useful at the same entertainment in the afternoon, even in the same company, only by shifting the several questions, answers, and replies, into different hands; and such as are adapted to meals will indifferently serve for dinners or suppers, only distinguishing between daylight and candle-light. By this method no diligent person of a tolerable memory can ever be at a loss.

It has been my constant opinion, that every man who is intrusted by nature with any useful talent of the mind, is bound by all the ties of honor and that justice which we all owe our country, to propose to himself some one illustrious action to be performed in his life for the public emolument: and I freely confess that so grand, so important an enterprise, as I have undertaken and executed to the best of my power,

well deserved a much abler hand, as well as a liberal encouragement from the crown. However, I am bound so far to acquit myself, as to declare, that I have often and most earnestly entreated several of my above-named friends, universally allowed to be of the first rank in wit and politeness, that they would undertake a work so honorable to themselves, and so beneficial to the kingdom; but so great was their modesty, that they all thought fit to excuse themselves, and impose the task on me; yet in so obliging a manner, and attended with such compliments on my poor qualifications, that I dare not repeat. And at last their entreaties, or rather their commands, added to that inviolable love I bear to the land of my nativity, prevailed upon me to engage in so bold an attempt.

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If my favorable and gentle readers could possibly conceive the perpetual watchings, the numberless toils, the frequent risings in the night, to set down several ingenious sentences that I suddenly or accidentally recollected, and which, without my utmost vigilance, had been irrecoverably lost for ever; if they would consider with what incredible diligence I daily and nightly attended at those houses where persons of both sexes, and of the most distinguished merit, used to meet and display their talents;

with what attention I listened to all their discourses, the better to retain them in my memory, and then at proper seasons, withdrew, unobserved, to enter them in my table-book, while the company little suspected what a noble work I had then in embryo: I say, if all these were known to the world, I think it would be no great presumption in me to expect, at a proper juncture, the public thanks of both houses of parliament for the service and honor I have done to the whole nation by my single pen.

Although I have never been once charged with the least tincture of vanity, the reader will, I hope, give me leave to put an easy question: What is become of all the king of Sweden's victories? where are the fruits of them at this day? or of what benefit will they be to posterity? Were not many of his greatest actions owing, at least in part, to fortune? were not all of them owing to valor of his troops, as much as to his own conduct? Could he have conquered the Polish king, or the czar of Muscovy, with his single arm? Far be it from me to envy or lessen the fame he has acquired; but, at the same time, I will venture to say, without breach of modesty, that I, who have alone, with this right hand, subdued barbarism, rudeness, and rusticity, who have established and fixed for ever the whole system of all true politeness and refine-

ment in conversation, should think myself most inhumanly treated by my countrymen, and would accordingly resent it as the highest indignity, to be put on a level, in point of fame, in after ages, with Charles XII. late king of Sweden.

And yet so incurable is the love of detraction, perhaps beyond what the charitable reader will easily believe, that I have been assured, by more than one credible person, how some of my enemies have industriously whispered about, that one Isaac Newton, an instrument-maker, formerly living near Leicesterfields, and afterwards a workman in the mint at the Tower, might possibly pretend to vie with me for fame at future times. The man, it seems, was knighted for making sun-dials better than others of his trade, and was thought to be a conjurer, because he knew how to draw lines and circles upon a slate, which nobody could understand. But adieu to all noble attempts for endless renown, if the ghost of an obscure mechanic shall be raised up to enter into competition with me, only for his skill in making pot-hooks and hangers with a pencil, which many thousand accomplished gentlemen and ladies can perform as well with pen and ink upon a piece of paper, and in a manner as little intelligible as those of sir Isaac.

My most ingenious friend, already mentioned,

Mr. Colley Cibber, who does so much honor to the laurel crown he deservedly wears (as he has often done to many imperial diadems placed on his head), was pleased to tell me, that, if my treatise was shaped into a comedy, the representation, performed to advantage on our theater, might very much contribute to the spreading of polite conversation among all persons of distinction through the whole kingdom.

I own the thought was ingenious, and my friend's intention good: but I cannot agree to his proposal; for Mr. Cibber himself allowed that the subjects handled in my work being so numerous and extensive, it would be absolutely impossible for one, two, or even six comedies, to contain them: whence it will follow, that many admirable and essential rules for polite conversation must be omitted.

And here let me do justice to my friend Mr. Tibbalds, who plainly confessed before Mr. Cibber himself, that such a project, as it would be a great diminution to my honor, so it would intolerably mangle my scheme, and thereby destroy the principal end at which I aimed, to form a complete body or system of this most useful science in all its parts: and therefore Mr. Tibbalds, whose judgment was never disputed, chose rather to fall in with my proposal, mentioned before, of erecting public schools and

seminaries all over the kingdom, to instruct the young people of both sexes in this art, according to my rules, and in the method that I have laid down.

I shall conclude this long, but necessary introduction, with a request, or, indeed, rather a just and reasonable demand, from all lords, ladies, and gentlemen, that while they are entertaining and improving each other with those polite questions, answers, repartees, replies, and rejoinders, which I have, with infinite labor and close application, during the space of thirty-six years, been collecting for their service and improvement, they shall, as an instance of gratitude, on every proper occasion, quote my name after this or the like manner: “Madam, as our Master Wagstaff says.”—“My lord, as our friend Wagstaff has it.”—I do likewise expect that all my pupils shall drink my health every day at dinner and supper during my life, and that they, or their posterity, shall continue the same ceremony to my not inglorious memory, after my decease, for ever.

DIALOGUE I

The Men.

Lord SPARKISH.

Lord SMART.

Sir JOHN LINGER.

Mr. NEVEROUT.

Colonel ATWIT.

The Ladies.

Lady SMART.

Miss NOTABLE.

Lady ANSWERALL.

ARGUMENT.

LORD SPARKISH and Colonel Atwit meet in the morning upon the Mall: Mr. Neverout joins them: they all go to breakfast at lady Smart's. Their conversation over their tea: after which they part; but my lord and the two gentlemen are invited to dinner:—Sir John Linger invited likewise, and comes a little too late. The whole conversation at dinner: after which, the ladies retire to their tea. The conversation of the ladies without the men, who are supposed to stay and drink a bottle, but, in some time, go to the ladies, and drink tea with them. The conversation there. After which, a party at quadrille until three in the morning; but no conversation set down. They all take leave and go home.

ST. JAMES'S PARK.

LORD SPARKISH *meeting* COL. ATWIT.*Col.* WELL met, my lord.

Spark. Thank ye, colonel. A parson would have said, I hope we shall meet in heaven. When did you see Tom Neverout?

Col. He's just coming toward us. Talk of the devil—

NEVEROUT *comes up.*

Col. How do you do, Tom?

Never. Never the better for you.

Col. I hope you are never the worse: but pray where's your manners? Don't you see my lord Sparkish?

Never. My lord, I beg your lordship's pardon.

Spark. Tom, how is it that you can't see the wood for trees? What wind blew you hither?

Never. Why, my lord, it is an ill wind blows nobody good; for it gives me the honor of seeing your lordship.

Col. Tom, you must go with us to lady Smart's to breakfast.

Never. Must! why, colonel, must's for the king. [*Col. offering, in jest, to draw his sword.*

Col. Have you spoke with all your friends?

Never. Colonel, as you are stout be merciful.

Spark. Come, agree, agree; the law's costly.

[*Col. taking his hand from his hilt.*

Col. Well, Tom, you are never the worse man to be afraid of me. Come along.

Never. What! do you think I was born in a wood, to be afraid of an owl? I'll wait on you. I hope Miss Notable will be there; 'egad, she's very handsome, and has wit at will.

Col. Why, every one as they like, as the good woman said when she kiss'd her cow.

LORD SMART'S *House*: *they knock at the door; the Porter comes out.*

Spark. Pray are you the porter?

Porter. Yes, for want of a better.

Spark. Is your lady at home?

Porter. She was at home just now, but she's not gone out yet.

Never. I warrant this rogue's tongue is well hung.

LADY SMART'S *Ante-chamber*.

LADY SMART and LADY ANSWERALL at the *Tea-table*.

Lady S. My lord, your lordship's most humble servant.

Spark. Madam, you spoke too late; I was your ladyship's before.

Lady S. Oh! colonel, are you here?

Col. As sure as you're there, madam.

Lady S. O, Mr. Neverout! What, such a man alive!

Never. Ay, madam, alive, and alive like to be, at your ladyship's service.

Lady S. Well, I'll get a knife, and nick it down that Mr. Neverout came to our house. And pray, what news, Mr. Neverout?

Never. Why, madam, queen Elizabeth's dead.

Lady S. Well, Mr. Neverout, I see you are no changeling.

MISS NOTABLE *comes in.*

Never. Miss, your slave: I hope your early rising will do you no harm. I find you are but just come out of the cloth market.

Miss. I always rise at eleven, whether it be day or not.

Col. Miss, I hope you are up for all day.

Miss. Yes, if I don't get a fall before night.

Col. Miss, I heard you were out of order; pray how are you now?

Miss. Pretty well, colonel, I thank you.

Col. Pretty and well, miss! that's two very good things.

Miss. I mean I am better than I was.

Never. Why then 'tis well you were sick.

Miss. What! Mr. Neverout, you take me up before I'm down.

Lady S. Come, let us leave off children's play, and go to push-pin.

Miss. [*To lady S.*] Pray, madam, give me some more sugar to my tea.

Col. O! miss, you must needs be very good humored, you love sweet things so well.

Never. Stir it up with the spoon, miss; for the deeper the sweeter.

Lady S. I assure you, miss, the colonel has made you a great compliment.

Miss. I am sorry for it; for, I have heard say, complimenting is lying.

Lady S. [*To Sparkish.*] My lord, methinks the sight of you is good for sore eyes; if we had known of your coming, we should have strewn rushes for you: How has your lordship done this long time?

Col. Faith, madam, he's better in health than in good conditions.

Spark. Well, I see there's no worse friend than one brings from home with one; and I am not the first man has carried a rod to whip himself.

Never. Here's poor miss has not a word to throw at a dog. Come, a penny for your thought.

Miss. It is not worth a farthing; for I was thinking of you.

COLONEL *rising up.*

Lady S. Colonel, where are you going so soon? I hope you did not come to fetch fire.

Col. Madam, I must needs go home for half an hour.

Miss. Why, colonel, they say the devil's at home.

Lady A. Well, but sit while you stay, 'tis as cheap sitting as standing.

Col. No, madam, while I'm standing I'm going.

Miss. Nay, let him go; I promise him we won't tear his clothes to hold him.

Lady S. I suppose, colonel, we keep you from better company: I mean only as to myself.

Col. Madam, I am all obedience.

[*Colonel sits down.*]

Lady S. Lord, miss, how can you drink your tea so hot? sure your mouth's paved. How do you like this tea, colonel?

Col. Well enough, madam; but methinks it is a little more ish.

Lady S. O! colonel, I understand you. Betty, bring the cannister. I have but very little of this tea left; but I don't love to make two wants of one; want when I have it, and want when I have it not. He, he, he, he! [Laughs.]

Lady A. [*To the maid.*] Why, sure, Betty, you are bewitched; the cream is burnt too.

Betty. Why, madam, the bishop has set his foot in it.

Lady S. Go, run, girl, and warm some fresh cream.

Betty. Indeed, madam, there's none left; for the cat has eaten it all.

Lady S. I doubt it was a cat with two legs.

Miss. Colonel, don't you love bread and butter with your tea?

Col. Yes, in a morning, miss; for they say,

butter is gold in a morning, silver at noon, but it is lead at night.

Never. Miss, the weather is so hot that my butter melts on my bread.

Lady A. Why, butter, I've heard 'em say, is mad twice a-year.

Spark. [*To the maid.*] Mrs. Betty, how does your body politic?

Col. Fie, my lord, you'll make Mrs. Betty blush.

Lady S. Blush! ay, blush like a blue dog.

Never. Pray, Mrs. Betty, are you not Tom Johnson's daughter?

Betty. So my mother tells me, sir.

Spark. But, Mrs. Betty, I hear you are in love.

Betty. My lord, I thank God I hate nobody; I am in charity with all the world.

Lady S. Why, wench, I think thy tongue runs upon wheels this morning. How came you by that scratch upon your nose? Have you been fighting with the cats?

Col. [*To Miss.*] Miss, when will you be married?

Miss. One of these odd-come-shortly's, colonel.

Never. Yes, they say the match is half made; the spark is willing, but miss is not.

Miss. I suppose the gentleman has got his own consent for it.

Lady A. Pray, my lord, did you walk through the Park in the rain?

Spark. Yes, madam, we were neither sugar nor salt; we were not afraid the rain would melt us. He, he, he! [*Laughs.*]

Col. It rained, and the sun shone at the same time.

Never. Why, then the devil was beating his wife behind the door with a shoulder of mutton. [*Laughs.*]

Col. A blind man would be glad to see that.

Lady S. Mr. Neverout, methinks you stand in your own light.

Never. Ah! madam, I have done so all my life.

Spark. I'm sure he sits in mine. Pr'ythee, Tom, sit a little further; I believe your father was no glazier.

Lady S. Miss, dear girl, fill me out a dish of tea, for I'm very lazy.

MISS fills a dish of tea, sweetens it, and then tastes it.

Lady S. What, miss, will you be my taster?

Miss. No, madam; but they say 'tis an ill cook that can't lick her own fingers.

Never. Pray, miss, fill me another.

Miss. Will you have it now, or stay till you get it?

Lady A. But, colonel, they say you went to court last night very drunk; nay, I'm told for certain, you had been among the Philistines: no wonder the cat wink'd when both her eyes were out.

Col. Indeed, madam, that's a lie.

Lady A. 'Tis better I should lie than you should lose your good manners: besides, I don't lie; I sit.

Never. O! faith, colonel, you must own you had a drop in your eye; when I left you, you were half seas over.

Spark. Well, I fear, lady Answerall can't live long, she has so much wit.

Never. No, she can't live, that's certain; but she may linger thirty or forty years.

Miss. Live long! ay, longer than a cat or dog, or a better thing.

Lady A. O! miss, you must give your vardi too!

Spark. Miss, shall I fill you another dish of tea?

Miss. Indeed, my lord, I have drank enough.

Spark. Come, it will do you more good than a month's fasting; here, take it.

Miss. No, I thank your lordship; enough's as good as a feast.

Spark. Well, but if you always say no, you'll never be married.

Lady A. Good miss, stir the fire, that the tea-kettle may boil. You have done it very well: now it burns purely. Well, miss, you'll have a cheerful husband.

Miss. Indeed, your ladyship could have stirred it much better.

Lady A. I know that very well, hussy; but I won't keep a dog and bark myself.

Never. What! you are stuck [*sick*], miss.

Miss. Not at all; for her ladyship meant you.

Never. O! faith, miss, you are in Lob's pound; get out as you can.

Miss. I won't quarrel with my bread and butter for all that; I know when I'm well.

Lady A. Well; but, miss—

Never. Ah! dear madam, let the matter fall; take pity on poor miss; don't throw water on a drowned rat.

Miss. Indeed, Mr. Neverout, you should be cut for the simples this morning; say a word more, and you had as good eat your nails.

Spark. Pray, miss, will you be so good as to favor us with a song?

Miss. Indeed, my lord, I can't; for I have a great cold.

Col. O! miss, they say all good singers have colds.

Spark. Pray, madam, does not miss sing very well?

Lady A. She sings, as one may say, my lord.

Miss. I hear Mr. Neverout has a very good voice.

Col. Yes, Tom sings well, but his luck's nought.

Never. Faith, colonel, you hit yourself a devilish box on the ear.

Col. Miss, will you take a pinch of snuff?

Miss. No, colonel, you must know that I never take snuff but when I am angry.

Lady A. Yes, yes, she can take snuff, but she has never a box to put it in.

Miss. Pray, colonel, let me see that box.

Col. Madam, there's never a C upon it.

Miss. Maybe there is, colonel.

Col. Ay, but May bees don't fly now, miss.

Never. Colonel, why so hard upon poor miss? Don't set your wit against a child. Miss, give me a blow, and I'll beat him.

Miss. So she prayed me to tell you.

Spark. Pray, my lady Smart, what kin are you to lord Pozz?

Lady S. Why, his grandmother and mine had four elbows.

Lady A. Well, methinks here's a silent meeting. Come, miss, hold up your head, girl; there's money bid for you. [*Miss starts.*]

Miss. Lord, madam, you frighten me out of my seven senses.

Spark. Well, I must be going.

Lady A. I have seen hastier people than you stay all night.

Col. [*To lady Smart.*] Tom Neverout and I are to leap to-morrow for a guinea.

Miss. I believe, colonel, Mr. Neverout can leap at a crust better than you.

Never. Miss, your tongue runs before your wit: nothing can tame you but a husband.

Miss. Peace! I think I hear the church-clock.

Never. Why, you know, as the fool thinks—

Lady S. Mr. Neverout, your handkerchief's fallen.

Miss. Let him set his foot on it, that it mayn't fly in his face.

Never. Well, miss—

Miss. Ay, ay; many a one says well that thinks ill.

Never. Well, miss, I'll think on this.

Miss. That's rhyme, if you take it in time.

Never. What! I see you are a poet.

Miss. Yes, if I had but the wit to show it.

Never. Miss, will you be so kind as to fill me a dish of tea?

Miss. Pray let your betters be served before you; I'm just going to fill one for myself; and, you know, the parson always christens his own child first.

Never. But I saw you fill one just now for the colonel: well, I find kissing goes by favor.

Miss. But pray, Mr. Neverout, what lady was that you were talking with in the side-box last Tuesday?

Never. Miss, can you keep a secret?

Miss. Yes, I can.

Never. Well, miss, and so can I.

Col. Odd-so! I have cut my thumb with this cursed knife!

Lady A. Ay; that was your mother's fault, because she only warned you not to cut your fingers.

Lady S. No, no; 'tis only fools that cut their fingers, but wise folks cut their thumbs.

Miss. I'm sorry for it, but I can't cry.

Col. Don't you think miss is grown?

Lady A. Ay, ill weeds grow apace.

A puff of smoke comes down the chimney.

Lady A. Lord, madam, does your ladyship's chimney smoke?

Col. No, madam; but they say smoke always

pursues the fair, and your ladyship sat nearest.

Lady S. Madam, do you love bohea tea?

Lady A. Why, madam, I must confess I do love it, but it does not love me.

Miss. [*to lady Smart.*] Indeed, madam, your ladyship is very sparing of your tea; I protest, the last I took was no more than water bewitch'd.

Col. Pray, miss, if I may be so bold, what lover gave you that fine etui?

Miss. Don't you know?—then keep counsel.

Lady A. I'll tell you, colonel, who gave it her: it was the best lover she will ever have while she lives—her own dear papa.

Never. Methinks, miss, I don't much like the color of that ribbon.

Miss. Why, then, Mr. Neverout, do you see, if you don't much like it, you may look off it.

Spark. I don't doubt, madam, but your ladyship has heard that sir John Brisk has got an employment at court.

Lady S. Yes, yes; and I warrant he thinks himself no small fool now.

Never. Yes, madam; I have heard some people take him for a wise man.

Lady S. Ay, ay; some are wise, and some are otherwise.

Lady A. Do you know him, Mr. Neverout?

Never. Know him! ay, as well as the beggar knows his dish.

Col. Well, I can only say that he has better luck than honester folks. But, pray, how came he to get this employment?

Spark. Why, by chance, as the man killed the devil.

Never. Why, miss, you are in a brown study: what's the matter? Methinks you look like Mumchance, that was hanged for saying nothing.

Miss. I'd have you to know, I scorn your words.

Never. Well, but scornful dogs will eat dirty puddings.

Miss. Well, my comfort is, your tongue is no slander. What! you would not have one be always on the high grin!

Never. Cry mapsticks, madam; no offence, I hope.

LADY SMART *breaks a teacup.*

Lady A. Lord, madam, how came you to break your cup?

Lady S. I can't help it, if I would cry my eyes out.

Miss. Why, sell it, madam, and buy a new one with some of the money.

Col. 'Tis a folly to cry for spilt milk.

Lady S. Why, if things did not break, or wear out, how would tradesmen live?

Miss. Well, I am very sick, if anybody cared for it.

Never. Come, then, miss, e'en make a die of it, and then we shall have a burying of our own.

Miss. The devil take you, Neverout! besides all small curses.

Footman brings the COLONEL a letter.

Lady A. I suppose, colonel, that's a billet-doux from your mistress.

Col. 'Egad, I don't know whence it comes; but whoe'er writ it, writes a hand like a foot.

Miss. Well, you may make a secret of it, but we can spell, and put together.

Never. Miss, what spells b double uzzard?

Miss. Buzzard in your teeth, Mr. Neverout.

Lady S. Now you are up, Mr. Neverout, will you do me the favor to do me the kindness to take off the teakettle?

Spark. I wonder what makes these bells ring.

Lady A. Why, my lord, I suppose, because they pull the ropes. *[Here all laugh.]*

NEVEROUT plays with a teacup.

Miss. Now, a child would have cried half an hour before it would have found out such a pretty plaything.

Lady S. Well said, miss! I vow, Mr. Never-out, the girl is too hard for you.

Never. Ay; miss will say anything but her prayers, and those she whistles.

Miss. Pray, colonel, make me a present of that pretty penknife.

Spark. Ay, miss, catch him at that, and hang him.

Col. Not for the world, dear miss; it will cut love.

Spark. Colonel, you shall be married first; I was going to say that.

Lady S. Well, but, for all that, I can tell who is a great admirer of miss. Pray, miss, how do you like Mr. Spruce? I swear I have often seen him cast a sheep's eye out of a calf's head at you: deny it if you can.

Miss. O, madam, all the world knows that Mr. Spruce is a general lover.

Col. Come, miss, 'tis too true to make a jest on. *[Miss blushes.*

Lady A. Well, however, blushing is some sign of grace.

Never. Miss says nothing; but I warrant she pays it off with thinking.

Miss. Well, ladies and gentlemen, you are pleased to divert yourselves; but, as I hope to be saved, there's nothing in it.

Lady S. Touch a gall'd horse, and he'll wince. Love will creep where it dare not go. I'd hold a hundred pound, Mr. Neverout was the inventor of that story; and, colonel, I doubt you had a finger in the pie.

NEVEROUT *to* MISS, *who is cooking her tea and bread and butter.*

Never. Come, come, miss, make much of nought; good folks are scarce.

Miss. What! and you must come in with your two eggs a-penny, and three of them rotten.

Col. [*To Sparkish.*] But, my lord, I forgot to ask you how you like my new clothes?

Spark. Why, very well, colonel; only, to deal plainly with you, methinks the worst piece is in the middle.

[*Here a loud laugh, often repeated.*]

Col. My lord, you are too severe on your friends.

Miss. Mr. Neverout, I'm hot, are you a sot?

Never. Miss, I'm cold, are you a scold? Take you that.

Lady S. I confess that was home. I find, Mr. Neverout, you won't give your head for the washing, as they say.

Miss. O! he's a sore man where the skin's off. I see Mr. Neverout has a mind to sharpen the

edge of his wit on the whetstone of my ignorance.

Spark. Faith, Tom, you are struck! I never heard a better thing.

Never. Pray, miss, give me leave to scratch you for that fine speech.

Miss. Pox on your picture! it cost me a groat the drawing.

Never. [*To lady S.*] 'Sbuds, madam, I have burnt my hand with your plaguy teakettle.

Lady S. Why, then, Mr. Neverout, you must say, God save the king.

Never. Did you ever see the like?

Miss. Never, but once at a wedding.

Col. Pray, miss, how old are you?

Miss. Why, I am as old as my tongue, and a little older than my teeth.

Spark. [*To lady A.*] Pray, madam, is Miss Buxom married? I hear 'tis all over the town.

Lady A. My lord, she's either married or worse.

Col. If she ben't married, at least she's lustily promised. But is it certain that sir John Blunderbuss is dead at last?

Spark. Yes, or else he's sadly wronged, for they have buried him.

Miss. Why, if he be dead, he'll eat no more bread.

Col. But, is he really dead?

Lady A. Yes, colonel, as sure as you're alive.

Col. They say he was an honest man.

Lady A. Yes, with good looking too.

.

MISS rises up.

Never. Deuce take you, miss; you trod on my foot: I hope you don't intend to come to my bedside.

Miss. In troth, you are afraid of your friends, and none of them near you.

Spark. Well said, girl! [*Giving her a chuck.*] Take that: they say a chuck under the chin is worth two kisses.

Lady A. But, Mr. Neverout, I wonder why such a handsome, straight young gentleman as you don't get some rich widow.

Spark. Straight! ay, straight as my leg, and that's crooked at knee.

Never. Faith, madam, if it rained such widows, none of them would fall upon me. Egad, I was born under a three-penny planet, never to be worth a groat.

Lady A. No, Mr. Neverout; I believe you were born with a caul on your head, you are such a favorite among the ladies: but what think you of widow Prim? she's immensely rich.

Never. Hang her! they say her father was a baker.

Lady S. Ay; but it is not, What is she? but, What has she? now-a-days.

Col. Tom, faith, put on a bold face for once, and have at the widow. I'll speak a good word for you to her.

Lady A. Ay; I warrant you'll speak one word for him and two for yourself.

Miss. Well, I had that at my tongue's end.

Lady A. Why, miss, they say good wits jump.

Never. Faith, madam, I had rather marry a woman I loved in her smock than widow Prim if she had her weight in gold.

Col. Pray, lady Answerall, where was you last Wednesday, when I did myself the honor to wait on you? I think your ladyship is one of the tribe of Gad.

Lady A. Why, colonel, I was at church.

Col. Nay, then, I will be hang'd, and my horse too.

Never. I believe her ladyship was at a church with a chimney in it.

Miss. Lord, my petticoat! how it hangs by jommetry!

Never. Perhaps the fault may be in your shape.

Miss. [*Looking gravely.*] Come, Mr. Never-out, there's no jest like the true jest; but I suppose you think my back is broad enough to bear any thing.

Never. Madam, I humbly beg your pardon.

Miss. Well, sir, your pardon's granted.

Never. Well, all things have an end, and a pudding has two, up-up-on me-my my word.

[*Stutters.*

Miss. What! Mr. Neverout, can't you speak without a spoon?

Spark. [*To lady Smart.*] Has your ladyship seen the duchess since your falling out?

Lady S. Never, my lord, but once at a visit, and she looked at me as the devil looked over Lincoln.

Never. Pray, miss, take a pinch of my snuff.

Miss. What! you break my head, and give me a plaster; well, with all my heart; once and not use it.

Never. Well, miss, if you wanted me and your victuals, you'd want your two best friends.

Col. [*To Neverout.*] Tom, miss and you must kiss and be friends.

NEVEROUT *salutes* MISS.

Miss. Anything for a quiet life: my nose itch'd, and I knew I should drink wine, or kiss a fool.

Col. Well, Tom, if that ben't fair, hang fair.

Never. I never said a rude thing to a lady in my life.

Miss. Here's a pin for that lie; I'm sure liars had need of good memories. Pray, colonel, was not he very uncivil to me but just now?

Lady A. Mr. Neverout, if miss will be angry for nothing, take my counsel, and bid her turn the buckle of her girdle behind her.

Never. Come, lady Answerall, I know better things; miss and I are good friends; don't put tricks upon travellers.

Col. Tom, not a word of the pudding, I beg you.

Lady S. Ah, colonel! you'll never be good, nor then neither.

Spark. Which of the goods d'ye mean? good for something, or good for nothing?

Miss. I have a blister on my tongue, yet I don't remember I told a lie.

Lady A. I thought you did just now.

Spark. Pray, madam, what did thought do?

Lady S. Well, for my life, I cannot conceive what your lordship means.

Spark. Indeed, madam, I meant no harm.

Lady S. No, to be sure! my lord you are as innocent as a devil of two years old.

Never. Madam, they say ill-doers are ill-deemers; but I don't apply it to your ladyship.

.

MISS *strives to snatch* Mr. NEVEROUT'S *snuff-box.*

Never. Madam, you missed that, as you missed your mother's blessing.

She tries again and misses.

Never. Snap short makes you look so lean, miss.

Miss. Poh! you are so robustious, you had like to put out my eye; I assure you, if you blind me, you must lead me.

Lady S. Dear miss, be quiet; and bring me a pin-cushion out of that closet.

MISS opens the closet door and squalls.

Lady S. Lord bless the girl! what's the matter now?

Miss. I vow, madam, I saw something in black; I thought it was a spirit.

Col. Why, miss, did you ever see a spirit?

Miss. No, sir; I thank God I never saw anything worse than myself.

Never. Well, I did a very foolish thing yesterday, and was a great puppy for my pains.

Miss. Very likely; for they say, many a true word's spoken in jest.

FOOTMAN returns,

Lady S. Well, did you deliver your message? you are fit to be sent for sorrow, you stay so long by the way.

Foot. Madam, my lady was not at home, so I did not leave the message.

Lady S. This it is to send a fool of an errand.

Spark. [*Looking at his watch.*] 'Tis past twelve o'clock.

Lady S. Well, what is that among all us?

Spark. Madam, I must take my leave: come, gentleman, are you for a march?

Lady S. Well, but your lordship and the colonel will dine with us to-day; and, Mr. Neverout, I hope we shall have your good company; there will be no soul else, beside my own lord and these ladies; for everybody knows I hate a crowd; I would rather want victuals than elbow-room; we dine punctually at three.

Spark. Madam, we'll be sure to attend your ladyship.

Col. Madam, my stomach serves me instead of a clock.

Another FOOTMAN comes back.

Lady S. Oh! you are the t'other fellow I sent; well, have you been with my lady Club? you are good to send of a dead man's errand.

Foot. Madam, my lady Club begs your ladyship's pardon: but she is engaged to-night.

Miss. Well, Mr. Neverout, here's the back of my hand to you.

Never. Miss, I find you will have the last word. Ladies, I am more yours than my own.

WILLIAM HAZLITT
ON THE CONVERSATION OF
AUTHORS
ON THE CONVERSATION OF
LORDS

ON THE CONVERSATION OF AUTHORS

AN author is bound to write—well or ill, wisely or foolishly: it is his trade. But I do not see that he is bound to talk, any more than he is bound to dance, or ride, or fence better than other people. Reading, study, silence, thought, are a bad introduction to loquacity. It would be sooner learnt of chambermaids and tapsters. He understands the art and mystery of his own profession, which is bookmaking: what right has anyone to expect or require him to do more—to make a bow gracefully on entering or leaving a room, to make love charmingly, or to make a fortune at all? In all things there is a division of labour. A lord is no less amorous for writing ridiculous love-letters, nor a general less successful for wanting wit and honesty. Why, then, may not a poor author say nothing, and yet pass muster? Set him on the top of a stage-coach, he will make no figure; he is *mumchance*, while the slang-wit flies about as fast as the dust, with the crack of the whip and the clatter of the horses' heels: put him in a ring of boxers, he is a poor creature—

And of his port as meek as is a maid.

Introduce him to a tea-party of milliners' girls, and they are ready to split their sides with laughing at him: over his bottle, he is dry: in the drawing-room, rude or awkward: he is too refined for the vulgar, too clownish for the fashionable:—"he is one that cannot make a good leg, one that cannot eat a mess of broth cleanly, one that cannot ride a horse without spur-galling, one that cannot salute a woman, and look on her directly:"—in courts, in camps, in town and country, he is a cypher or a butt: he is good for nothing but a laughing-stock or a scarecrow. You can scarcely get a word out of him for love or money. He knows nothing. He has no notion of pleasure or business, or of what is going on in the world; he does not understand cookery (unless he is a doctor in divinity), nor surgery, nor chemistry (unless he is a *quidnunc*), nor mechanics, nor husbandry and tillage (unless he is as great an admirer of Tull's *Husbandry*, and has profited as much by it as the philosopher of Botley)—no, nor music, painting, the drama, nor the fine arts in general.

"What the deuce is it then, my good sir, that he does understand, or know anything about?"

"BOOKS, VENUS, BOOKS!"

"What books?"

"Not receipt-books, Madona, nor account-books, nor books of pharmacy, or the veterinary art (they belong to their respective callings and handicrafts), but books of liberal taste and general knowledge."

"What do you mean by that general knowledge which implies not a knowledge of things in general, but an ignorance (by your own account) of every one in particular: or by that liberal taste which scorns the pursuits and acquirements of the rest of the world in succession, and is confined exclusively, and by way of excellence, to what nobody takes an interest in but yourself, and a few idlers like yourself? Is this what the critics mean by the *belles-lettres*, and the study of humanity?"

Book-knowledge, in a word, then, is knowledge *communicable by books*: and it is general and liberal for this reason, that it is intelligible and interesting on the bare suggestion. That to which anyone feels a romantic attachment, merely from finding it in a book, must be interesting in itself: that which he constantly forms a lively and entire conception of, from seeing a few marks and scratches upon paper, must be taken from common nature: that which, the first time you meet with it, seizes upon the attention as a curious speculation, must exercise the general faculties of the human mind. There

are certain broader aspects of society and views of things common to every subject, and more or less cognisable to every mind; and these the scholar treats, and founds his claims to general attention upon them, without being chargeable with pedantry. The minute description of fishing-tackle, of baits and flies in *Walton's Complete Angler*, make that work a great favourite with sportsmen: the alloy of an amiable humanity, and the modest but touching descriptions of familiar incidents and rural objects scattered through it, have made it an equal favourite with every reader of taste and feeling. *Montaigne's Essays*, *Dilworth's Spelling Book*, and *Fearn's Treatise on Contingent Remainders*, are all equally books, but not equally adapted for all classes of readers. The two last are of no use but to schoolmasters and lawyers: but the first is a work we may recommend to anyone to read who has ever thought at all, or who would learn to think justly on any subject. Persons of different trades and professions—the mechanic, the shopkeeper, the medical practitioner, the artist, &c., may all have great knowledge and ingenuity in their several vocations, the details of which will be very edifying to themselves, and just as incomprehensible to their neighbours: but over and above this professional and technical knowledge, they must be supposed to have a stock of

common sense and common feeling to furnish subjects for common conversation, or to give them any pleasure in each other's company. It is to this common stock of ideas, spread over the surface, or striking its roots into the very centre of society, that the popular writer appeals, and not in vain; for he finds readers. It is of this finer essence of wisdom and humanity "etherial mould, sky-tinctured," that books of the better sort are made. They contain the language of thought. It must happen that, in the course of time and the variety of human capacity, some persons will have struck out finer observations, reflections, and sentiments than others. These they have committed to books of memory, have bequeathed as a lasting legacy to posterity; and such persons have become standard authors. We visit at the shrine, drink in some measure of the inspiration, and cannot easily "breathe in other air less pure, accustomed to immortal fruits." Are we to be blamed for this because the vulgar and illiterate do not always understand us? The fault is rather in them who are "confined and cabin'd in" each in their own particular sphere and compartment of ideas, and have not the same refined medium of communication or abstracted topics of discourse. Bring a number of literary, or of illiterate persons together, perfect strangers to

each other, and see which party will make the best company. "Verily, we have our reward." We have made our election, and have no reason to repent it, if we were wise. But the misfortune is, we wish to have all the advantages on one side. We grudge, and cannot reconcile it to ourselves, that anyone "should go about to cozen fortune, without the stamp of learning!" We think "because we are *scholars*, there shall be no more cakes and ale!" We don't know how to account for it, that barmaids should gossip, or ladies whisper, or bullies roar, or fools laugh, or knaves thrive, without having gone through the same course of select study that we have! This vanity is preposterous, and carries its own punishment with it. Books are a world in themselves, it is true; but they are not the only world. The world itself is a volume larger than all the libraries in it. Learning is a sacred deposit from the experience of ages; but it has not put all future experience on the shelf, or debarred the common herd of mankind from the use of their hands, tongues, eyes, ears, or understandings. Taste is a luxury for the privileged few: but it would be hard upon those who have not the same standard of refinement in their own minds that we suppose ourselves to have, if this should prevent them from having recourse, as usual, to their old frolics, coarse jokes, and

horse-play, and getting through the wear and tear of the world, with such homely sayings and shrewd helps as they may. Happy is it, that the mass of mankind eat and drink, and sleep, and perform their several tasks, and do as they like without us—caring nothing for our scribblings, our carpings, and our quibbles; and moving on the same, in spite of our fine-spun distinctions, fantastic theories, and lines of demarcation, which are like chalk-figures drawn on ballroom floors to be danced out before morning! In the field opposite the window where I write this, there is a country-girl picking stones: in the one next it, there are several poor women weeding the blue and red flowers from the corn: farther on, are two boys, tending a flock of sheep. What do they know or care about what I am writing about them, or ever will?—or what would they be the better for it, if they did? Or why need we despise

The wretched slave,
 Who like a lackey, from the rise to the set,
 Sweats in the eye of Phæbus, and all night
 Sleeps in Elysium; next day, after dawn,
 Doth rise, and help Hyperion to his horse;
 And follows so the ever-running year
 With profitable labour to his grave?

Is not this life as sweet as writing Ephemerides? But we put that which flutters the brain

idly for a moment, and then is heard no more, in competition with nature, which exists everywhere, and lasts always. We not only underrate the force of nature, and make too much of art—but we also overrate our own accomplishments and advantages derived from art. In the presence of clownish ignorance, or of persons without any great pretensions, real or affected, we are very much inclined to take upon ourselves, as the virtual representatives of science, art, and literature. We have a strong itch to show off and do the honours of civilization for all the great men whose works we have ever read, and whose names our auditors have never heard of, as noblemen's lacqueys, in the absence of their masters, give themselves airs of superiority over everyone else. But though we have read Congreve, a stage-coachman may be an overmatch for us in wit: though we are deep-versed in the excellence of Shakspeare's colloquial style, a village beldam may outscold us: though we have read Machiavel in the original Italian, we may be easily outwitted by a clown: and though we have cried our eyes out over the *New Eloise*, a poor shepherd-lad, who hardly knows how to spell his own name, may "tell his tale, under the hawthorn in the dale," and prove a more thriving wooer. What then is the advantage we possess over the meanest of the mean?

Why this, that we have read Congreve, Shakspeare, Machiavel, the *New Eloise*;—not that we are to have their wit, genius, shrewdness, or melting tenderness.

From speculative pursuits we must be satisfied with speculative benefits. From reading too, we learn to write. If we have had the pleasure of studying the highest models of perfection in their kind, and can hope to leave anything ourselves, however slight, to be looked upon as a model, or even a good copy in its way, we may think ourselves pretty well off, without engrossing all the privileges of learning, and all the blessings of ignorance into the bargain.

It has been made a question whether there have not been individuals in common life of greater talents and powers of mind than the most celebrated writers—whether, for instance, such or such a Liverpool merchant, or Manchester manufacturer, was not a more sensible man than Montaigne, of a longer reach of understanding than the Viscount of St. Albans. There is no saying, unless some of these illustrious obscure had communicated their important discoveries to the world. But then they would have been authors! On the other hand, there is a set of critics who fall into the contrary error; and suppose that unless the proof of capacity is laid before all the world, the capacity itself can-

not exist; looking upon all those who have not commenced authors, as literally “stocks and stones, and worse than senseless things.” I remember trying to convince a person of this class, that a young lady, whom he knew nothing of, the niece of a celebrated authoress,¹ had just the same sort of fine *tact* and ironical turn in conversation, that her relative had shown in her writings when young. The only answer I could get was an incredulous smile, and the observation that when she wrote anything as good as *Evelina*, or *Cecilia*, he might think her as clever. I said all I meant was, that she had the same family talents, and asked whether he thought that if Miss Burney had not been very clever, as a mere girl, before she wrote her novels, she would ever have written them? It was all in vain. He still stuck to his text, and was convinced that the niece was a little fool compared to her aunt at the same age; and if he had known the aunt formerly, he would have had just the same opinion of *her*. My friend was one of those who have a settled persuasion that it is the book that makes the author, and not the author the book. That’s a strange opinion for a great philosopher to hold. But he wilfully shuts his eyes to the germs and indistinct workings of genius, and treats them with

¹ Miss Burney.—ED.

supercilious indifference, till they stare him in the face through the press; and then takes cognisance only of the overt acts and published evidence. This is neither a proof of wisdom, nor the way to be wise. It is partly pedantry and prejudice, and partly feebleness of judgment and want of magnanimity. He dare as little commit himself on the character of books, as of individuals, till they are stamped by the public. If you show him any work for his approbation, he asks, "Whose is the superscription?"—He judges of genius by its shadow, reputation—of the metal by the coin. He is just the reverse of another person whom I know—for, as Godwin never allows a particle of merit to anyone till it is acknowledged by the whole world, Coleridge withholds his tribute of applause from every person in whom any mortal but himself can descry the least glimpse of understanding. He would be thought to look farther into a millstone than anybody else. He would have others see with his eyes, and take their opinions from him on trust, in spite of their senses. The more obscure and defective the indications of merit, the greater his sagacity and candour in being the first to point them out. He looks upon what he nicknames a *man of genius*, but as the breath of his nostrils, and the clay in the potter's hands. If any such inert,

unconscious mass, under the fostering care of the modern Prometheus, is kindled into life,—begins to see, speak, and move, so as to attract the notice of other people,—our jealous patroniser of latent worth in that case throws aside, scorns, and hates his own handiwork; and deserts his intellectual offspring from the moment they can go alone and shift for themselves.—But to pass on to our more immediate subject.

The conversation of authors is not so good as might be imagined: but, such as it is (and with rare exceptions) it is better than any other. The proof of which is, that, when you are used to it, you cannot put up with any other. That of mixed company becomes utterly intolerable—you cannot sit out a common tea and card party, at least, if they pretend to talk at all. You are obliged in despair to cut all your old acquaintances who are not *au fait* on the prevailing and most smartly contested topics, who are not imbued with the high gusto of criticism and *virtû*. You cannot bear to hear a friend whom you have not seen for many years, tell at how much a yard he sells his laces and tapes, when he means to move into his next house, when he heard last from his relations in the country, whether trade is alive or dead, or whether Mr. Such-a-one gets to look old. This sort of neighbourly gossip will not go down

after the high-raised tone of literary conversation. The last may be absurd, very unsatisfactory, and full of turbulence and heartburnings; but it has a zest in it which more ordinary topics of news or family affairs do not supply.

Neither will the conversation of what we understand by *gentlemen* and men of fashion, do after that of men of letters. It is flat, insipid, stale, and unprofitable, in the comparison. They talk about much the same things—pictures, poetry, politics, plays; but they do it worse, and at a sort of vapid secondhand. They, in fact, talk out of newspapers and magazines, what *we write there*. They do not feel the same interest in the subjects they affect to handle with an air of fashionable condescension, nor have they the same knowledge of them, if they were ever so much in earnest in displaying it. If it were not for the wine and the dessert, no author in his senses would accept an invitation to a well-dressed dinner-party, except out of pure good-nature and unwillingness to disoblige by his refusal. Persons in high life talk almost entirely by rote. There are certain established modes of address, and certain answers to them expected as a matter of course, as a point of etiquette. The studied forms of politeness do not give the greatest possible scope to an exuberance of wit and fancy. The fear of giving offence destroys

sincerity, and without sincerity there can be no true enjoyment of society, nor unfettered exertion of intellectual activity. Those who have been accustomed to live with the great are hardly considered as conversable persons in literary society. They are not to be talked with, any more than puppets or echoes. They have no opinions but what will please; and you naturally turn away, as a waste of time and words, from attending to a person who just before assented to what you said, and whom you find the moment after, from something that unexpectedly or perhaps by design drops from him, to be of a totally different way of thinking. This *bush-fighting* is not regarded as fair play among scientific men.

As fashionable conversation is a sacrifice to politeness, so the conversation of low life is nothing but rudeness. They contradict you without giving a reason, or if they do, it is a very bad one—swear, talk loud, repeat the same thing fifty times over, get to calling names, and from words proceed to blows. You cannot make companions of servants, or persons in an inferior station in life. You may talk to them on matters of business, and what they have to do for you (as lords talk to bruisers on subjects of *fancy*, or country squires to their grooms on horse-racing), but out of that narrow sphere, to

any general topic, you cannot lead them; the conversation soon flags, and you go back to the old question, or are obliged to break up the sitting for want of ideas in common.

The conversation of authors is better than that of most professions. It is better than that of lawyers, who talk nothing but *double entendre*—than that of physicians, who talk of the approaching deaths of the College, or the marriage of some new practitioner with some rich widow—than that of divines, who talk of the last place they dined at—than that of University-men, who make stale puns, repeat the refuse of London newspapers, and affect an ignorance of Greek and mathematics; it is better than that of players, who talk of nothing but the green-room, and rehearse the scholar, the wit, or the fine gentleman, like a part on the stage; or than that of ladies, who, whatever you talk of, think of nothing, and expect you to think of nothing, but themselves. It is not easy to keep up a conversation with women in company. It is thought a piece of rudeness to differ from them: it is not quite fair to ask them a reason for what they say. You are afraid of pressing too hard upon them: but where you cannot differ openly and unreservedly, you cannot heartily agree. It is not so in France. There the women talk of things in general, and reason better than the

men in this country. They are mistresses of the intellectual foils. They are adepts in all the topics. They know what is to be said for and against all sorts of questions, and are lively and full of mischief into the bargain. They are very subtle. They put you to your trumps immediately. Your logic is more in requisition even than your gallantry. You must argue as well as bow yourself into the good graces of these modern amazons. What a situation for an Englishman to be placed in! ¹

The fault of literary conversation in general is its too great tenaciousness. It fastens upon a subject, and will not let it go. It resembles a battle rather than a skirmish, and makes a toil of a pleasure. Perhaps it does this from necessity, from a consciousness of wanting the more familiar graces, the power to sport and trifle, to touch lightly and adorn agreeably, every view or turn of a question *en passant*, as it arises. Those who have a reputation to lose are too ambitious of shining, to please. "To excel in conversation," said an ingenious man, "one must not be always striving to say good things: to say

¹ The topics of metaphysical argument having got into female society in France, is a proof how much they must have been discussed there generally, and how unfounded the charge is which we bring against them of excessive thoughtfulness and frivolity. The French (taken all together) are a more sensible, reflecting and better-informed people than the English. [1825.]

one good thing, one must say many bad, and more indifferent ones." This desire to shine without the means at hand, often makes men silent:—

The fear of being silent strikes us dumb.

A writer who has been accustomed to take a connected view of a difficult question and to work it out gradually in all its bearings, may be very deficient in that quickness and ease which men of the world, who are in the habit of hearing a variety of opinions, who pick up an observation on one subject, and another on another, and who care about none any farther than the passing away of an idle hour, usually acquire. An author has studied a particular point—he has read, he has inquired, he has thought a great deal upon it: he is not contented to take it up casually in common with others, to throw out a hint, to propose an objection: he will either remain silent, uneasy, and dissatisfied, or he will begin at the beginning, and go through with it to the end. He is for taking the whole responsibility upon himself. He would be thought to understand the subject better than others, or indeed would show that nobody else knows anything about it. There are always three or four points on which the literary novice at his first outset in life fancies he can enlighten

every company, and bear down all opposition: but he is cured of this quixotic and pugnacious spirit, as he goes more into the world, where he finds that there are other opinions and other pretensions to be adjusted besides his own. When this asperity wears off, and a certain scholastic precocity is mellowed down, the conversation of men of letters becomes both interesting and instructive. Men of the world have no fixed principles, no groundwork of thought: mere scholars have too much an object, a theory always in view, to which they wrest everything, and not unfrequently, common sense itself. By mixing with society, they rub off their hardness of manner, and impracticable, offensive singularity, while they retain a greater depth and coherence of understanding. There is more to be learnt from them than from their books. This was a remark of Rousseau's, and it is a very true one. In the confidence and unreserve of private intercourse, they are more at liberty to say what they think, to put the subject in different and opposite points of view, to illustrate it more briefly and pithily by familiar expressions, by an appeal to individual character and personal knowledge—to bring in the limitation, to obviate misconception, to state difficulties on their own side of the argument, and answer them as well as they can. This would hardly agree with

the prudery, and somewhat ostentatious claims of authorship. Dr. Johnson's conversation in Boswell's *Life* is much better than his published works: and the fragments of the opinions of celebrated men, preserved in their letters or in anecdotes of them, are justly sought after as invaluable for the same reason. For instance, what a fund of sense there is in Grimm's *Memoirs*! We thus get at the essence of what is contained in their more laboured productions, without the affectation or formality. Argument, again, is the death of conversation, if carried on in a spirit of hostility: but discussion is a pleasant and profitable thing, where you advance and defend your opinions as far as you can, and admit the truth of what is objected against them with equal impartiality: in short, where you do not pretend to set up for an oracle, but freely declare what you really know about any question, or suggest what has struck you as throwing a new light upon it, and let it pass for what it is worth. This tone of conversation was well described by Dr. Johnson, when he said of some party at which he had been present the night before—"We had a good talk, sir!" As a general rule, there is no conversation worth anything but between friends, or those who agree in the same leading views of a subject. Nothing was ever learnt by either side in a dis-

pute. You contradict one another, will not allow a grain of sense in what your adversary advances, are blind to whatever makes against yourself, dare not look the question fairly in the face, so that you cannot avail yourself even of your real advantages, insist most on what you feel to be the weakest points of your argument, and get more and more absurd, dogmatical, and violent every moment. Disputes for victory generally end to the dissatisfaction of all parties; and the one recorded in *Gil Blas* breaks up just as it ought. I once knew a very ingenious man, than whom, to take him in the way of common chit-chat or fire-side gossip, no one could be more entertaining or rational. He would make an apt classical quotation, propose an explanation of a curious passage in Shakspeare's *Venus and Adonis*, detect a metaphysical error in Locke, would infer the volatility of the French character from the chapter in Sterne where the Count mistakes the feigned name of Yorick for a proof of his being the identical imaginary character in Hamlet (*Et vous êtes Yorick!*)—thus confounding words with things twice over—but let a difference of opinion be once hitched in, and it was all over with him. His only object from that time was to shut out common sense, and to be proof against conviction. He would argue the most ridiculous point (such

as that there were two original languages) for hours together, nay, through the horologe. You would not suppose it was the same person. He was like an obstinate runaway horse, that takes the bit in his mouth, and becomes mischievous and unmanageable. He had made up his mind to one thing—not to admit a single particle anyone else said for or against him. It was all the difference between a man drunk and sober, sane or mad. It is the same when he once gets the pen in his hand. He has been trying to prove a contradiction in terms for the last ten years of his life, viz., that the Bourbons have the same right to the throne of France that the Brunswick family have to the throne of England. Many people think there is a want of honesty or a want of understanding in this. There is neither. But he will persist in an argument to the last pinch; he will yield, in absurdity, to no man!

This litigious humour is bad enough: but there is one character still worse—that of a person who goes into company, not to contradict, but to *talk at* you. This is the greatest nuisance in civilised society. Such a person does not come armed to defend himself at all points, but to unsettle, if he can, and throw a slur on all your favourite opinions. If he has a notion that anyone in the room is fond of poetry, he immediately volunteers a contemptuous tirade against

the idle jingle of verse. If he suspects you have a delight in pictures, he endeavours, not by fair argument, but by a side-wind, to put you out of conceit with so frivolous an art. If you have a taste for music, he does not think much good is to be done by this tickling of the ears. If you speak in praise of a comedy, he does not see the use of wit: if you say you have been to a tragedy, he shakes his head at this mockery of human misery, and thinks it ought to be prohibited. He tries to find out beforehand whatever it is that you take a particular pride or pleasure in, that he may annoy your self-love in the tenderest point (as if he were probing a wound) and make you dissatisfied with yourself and your pursuits for several days afterwards. A person might as well make a practice of throwing out scandalous aspersions against your dearest friends or nearest relations, by way of ingratiating himself into your favour. Such ill-timed impertinence is "villainous, and shows a pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it."

The soul of conversation is sympathy.—Authors should converse chiefly with authors, and their talk should be of books. "When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war." There is nothing so pedantic as pretending not to be pedantic. No man can get above his pursuit in life: it is getting above himself, which is

impossible. There is a freemasonry in all things. You can only speak to be understood, but this you cannot be, except by those who are in the secret. Hence an argument has been drawn to supersede the necessity of conversation altogether; for it has been said, that there is no use in talking to people of sense, who know all that you can tell them, nor to fools, who will not be instructed. There is, however, the smallest encouragement to proceed, when you are conscious that the more you really enter into a subject, the farther you will be from the comprehension of your hearers—and that the more proofs you give of any position, the more odd and out-of-the-way they will think your notions. Coleridge is the only person who can talk to all sorts of people, on all sorts of subjects, without caring a farthing for their understanding one word he says—and *he* talks only for admiration and to be listened to, and accordingly the least interruption puts him out. I firmly believe he would make just the same impression on half his audience, if he purposely repeated absolute nonsense with the same voice and manner and inexhaustible flow of undulating speech! In general, wit shines only by reflection. You must take your cue from your company—must rise as they rise, and sink as they fall. You must see that your good things, your knowing allusions,

are not flung away, like the pearls in the adage. What a check it is to be asked a foolish question; to find that the first principles are not understood! You are thrown on your back immediately, the conversation is stopped like a country-dance by those who do not know the figure. But when a set of adepts, of *illuminati*, get about a question, it is worth while to hear them talk. They may snarl and quarrel over it, like dogs; but they pick it bare to the bone, they masticate it thoroughly.

The Same Subject continued.

This was the case formerly at Lamb's—where we used to have many lively skirmishes at their Thursday evening parties. I doubt whether the Small-coal man's musical parties could exceed them.¹ Oh! for the pen of John Buncke to consecrate a *petit souvenir* to their memory!—There was Lamb himself, the most delightful, the most provoking, the most witty and sensible of men. He always made the best pun, and the best remark in the course of the evening. His serious conversation, like his serious writing, is his best. No one ever

¹ Thomas Britton. He was a native of Wellingborough, county Northampton. See a good account of him in *Reliquiae Hearnianae*, 1857, p. 339.—Ed.

stammered out such fine, piquant, deep, eloquent things in half a dozen half-sentences as he does. His jests scald like tears: and he probes a question with a play upon words. What a keen, laughing, hair-brained vein of home-felt truth! What choice venom! How often did we cut into the haunch of letters, while we discussed the haunch of mutton on the table! How we skimmed the cream of criticism! How we got into the heart of controversy! How we picked out the marrow of authors! "And in our flowing cups, many a good name and true was freshly remembered." Recollect (most sage and critical reader) that in all this I was but a guest! Need I go over the names? They were but the old everlasting set—Milton and Shakespeare, Pope and Dryden, Steele and Addison, Swift and Gay, Fielding, Smollett, Sterne, Richardson, Hogarth's prints, Claude's landscapes, the cartoons at Hampton Court, and all those things that, having once been, must ever be. The Scotch novels had not then been heard of: so we said nothing about them. In general, we were hard upon the moderns. The author of the *Rambler* was only tolerated in Boswell's *Life* of him; and it was as much as anyone could do to edge in a word for *Junius*. Lamb could not bear *Gil Blas*. This was a fault. I remember the great-

est triumph I ever had was in persuading him, after some years' difficulty, that Fielding was better than Smollett. On one occasion, he was for making out a list of persons famous in history that one would wish to see again—at the head of whom were Pontius Pilate, Sir Thomas Browne, and Dr. Faustus—but we blackballed most of his list! ¹ But with what a gusto would he describe his favourite authors, Donne, or Sir Philip Sidney, and call their most crabbed passages *delicious*! He tried them on his palate as epicures taste olives, and his observations had a smack in them, like a roughness on the tongue. With what discrimination he hinted a defect in what he admired most—as in saying that the display of the sumptuous banquet in *Paradise Regained* was not in true keeping, as the simplest fare was all that was necessary to tempt the extremity of hunger—and stating that Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* were too much like married people. He has furnished many a text for Coleridge to preach upon. There was no fuss or cant about him: nor were his sweets or his sour sours ever diluted with one particle of affectation. I cannot say that the party at Lamb's were all of one description. There were hon-

¹ This subject is treated more at large in the Essay *On Persons one would wish to have seen*, in the volume entitled *Winterslow*, etc., 1850, p. 35. See *Memoirs of William Hazlitt*, 1867. cap. 18.—ED.



After the painting by James B. Doyle.

A Literary Party at Sir Joshua Reynolds's,

orary members, lay-brothers. Wit and good fellowship was the motto inscribed over the door. When a stranger came in, it was not asked, "Has he written anything?"—we were above that pedantry; but we waited to see what he could do. If he could take a hand at piquet, he was welcome to sit down. If a person liked anything, if he took snuff heartily, it was sufficient. He would understand by analogy, the pungency of other things besides Irish black-guard or Scotch rappee. A character was good anywhere, in a room or on paper. But we abhorred insipidity, affectation, and fine gentlemen. There was one of our party who never failed to mark "two for his Nob" at cribbage, and he was thought no mean person. This was Ned Phillips, and a better fellow in his way breathes not. There was —, who asserted some incredible matter of fact as a likely paradox, and settled all controversies by an *ipse dixit*, a *fiat* of his will, hammering out many a hard theory on the anvil of his brain—the Baron Munchausen of politics and practical philosophy: there was Captain Burney, who had you at an advantage by never understanding you:—there was Jem White, the Author of *Falstaff's Letters*, who the other day left this dull world to go in search of more kindred spirits, "turning like the latter end of a lover's lute:"—there

was Ayrton, who sometimes dropped in, the Will Honeycomb of our set—and Mrs. Reynolds, who being of a quiet turn, loved to hear a noisy debate. An utterly uninformed person might have supposed this a scene of vulgar confusion and uproar. While the most critical question was pending, while the most difficult problem in philosophy was solving, Phillips cried out, "That's game," and Martin Burney muttered a quotation over the last remains of a veal-pie at a side table. Once, and once only, the literary interest overcame the general. For Coleridge was riding the high German horse, and demonstrating the Categories of the Transcendental Philosophy of the Author of the *Road to Ruin*; who insisted on his knowledge of German, and German metaphysics, having read the *Critique of Pure Reason* in the original. "My dear Mr. Holcroft," said Coleridge, in a tone of infinitely provoking conciliation, "you really put me in mind of a sweet pretty German girl, about fifteen, that I met with in the Hartz forest in Germany—and who one day, as I was reading the *Limits of the Knowable and the Unknowable*, the profoundest of all his works, with great attention, came behind my chair, and leaning over, said, 'What, you read Kant? Why, I that am a German born, don't understand him!'" This was too much to bear, and Hol-

croft, starting up, called out in no measured tone, "Mr. Coleridge, you are the most eloquent man I ever met with, and the most troublesome with your eloquence!" Phillips held the cribbage-peg that was to mark him game, suspended in his hand; and the whist table was silent for a moment. I saw Holcroft downstairs, and, on coming to the landing-place at Mitre Court, he stopped me to observe, that "he thought Mr. Coleridge a very clever man, with a great command of language, but that he feared he did not always affix very precise ideas to the words he used." After he was gone, we had our laugh out, and went on with the argument on the nature of Reason, the Imagination, and the Will. I wish I could find a publisher for it: it would make a supplement to the *Biographia Literaria* in a volume-and-a-half octavo.

Those days are over! An event, the name of which I wish never to mention, broke up our party, like a bomb-shell thrown into the room: and now we seldom meet——

Like angels' visits, short and far between.

There is no longer the same set of persons, nor of associations. Lamb does not live where he did. By shifting his abode, his notions seem less fixed. He does not wear his old snuff-coloured coat and breeches. It looks like an alter-

ation in his style. An author and a wit should have a separate costume, a particular cloth: he should present something positive and singular to the mind, like Mr. Douce of the Museum. Our faith in the religion of letters will not bear to be taken to pieces, and put together again by caprice or accident. Leigh Hunt goes there sometimes. He has a fine vinous spirit about him, and tropical blood in his veins: but he is better at his own table. He has a great flow of pleasantry and delightful animal spirits: but his hits do not tell like Lamb's; you cannot repeat them the next day. He requires not only to be appreciated but to have a select circle of admirers and devotees, to feel himself quite at home. He sits at the head of a party with great gaiety and grace; has an elegant manner and turn of features; is never at a loss—*alinquando sufflaminandus erat*—has continual sportive sallies of wit or fancy; tells a story capitally; mimics an actor or an acquaintance to admiration; laughs with great glee and good humour at his own or other people's jokes; understands the point of an equivoque, or an observation immediately; has a taste and knowledge of books, of music, of medals; manages an argument adroitly; is genteel and gallant, and has a set of bye-phrases and quaint allusions always at hand to produce a laugh:—if he has a fault, it is that

he does not listen so well as he speaks, is impatient of interruption, and is fond of being looked up to, without considering by whom. I believe, however, he has pretty well seen the folly of this. Neither is his ready display of personal accomplishment and variety of resources an advantage to his writings. They sometimes present a desultory and slipshod appearance, owing to this very circumstance. The same things that tell, perhaps, best to a private circle round the fireside, are not always intelligible to the public, nor does he take pains to make them so. He is too confident and secure of his audience. That which may be entertaining enough with the assistance of a certain liveliness of manner, may read very flat on paper, because it is abstracted from all the circumstances that had set it off to advantage. A writer should recollect that he has only to trust to the immediate impression of words, like a musician who sings without the accompaniment of an instrument. There is nothing to help out, or slubber over, the defects of the voice in the one case, nor of the style in the other. The reader may, if he pleases, get a very good idea of Leigh Hunt's conversation from a very agreeable paper he has lately published, called the *Indicator*, than which nothing can be more happily conceived or executed.

The art of conversation is the art of hearing as well as of being heard. Authors in general are not good listeners. Some of the best talkers are, on this account, the worst company; and some who are very indifferent, but very great talkers, are as bad. It is sometimes wonderful to see how a person, who has been entertaining or tiring a company by the hour together, drops his countenance as if he had been shot, or had been seized with a sudden lockjaw, the moment anyone interposes a single observation. The best converser I know is, however, the best listener. I mean Mr. Northcote, the painter. Painters by their profession are not bound to shine in conversation, and they shine the more. He lends his ear to an observation as if you had brought him a piece of news, and enters into it with as much avidity and earnestness as if it interested himself personally. If he repeats an old remark or story, it is with the same freshness and point as for the first time. It always arises out of the occasion, and has the stamp of originality. There is no parroting of himself. His look is a continual, ever-varying history-piece of what passes in his mind. His face is a book. There need no marks of interjection or interrogation to what he says. His manner is quite picturesque. There is an excess of character and *naïveté* that never tires. His thoughts

bubble up and sparkle like beads on old wine. The fund of anecdote, the collection of curious particulars is enough to set up any common retailer of jests that dines out every day; but these are not strung together like a row of galley-slaves, but are always introduced to illustrate some argument or bring out some fine distinction of character. The mixture of spleen adds to the sharpness of the point, like poisoned arrows. Mr. Northcote enlarges with enthusiasm on the old painters, and tells good things of the new. The only thing he ever vexed me in was his liking the *Catalogue Raisonné*. I had almost as soon hear him talk of Titian's pictures (which he does with tears in his eyes, and looking just like them) as see the originals, and I had rather hear him talk of Sir Joshua's than see them. He is the last of that school who knew Goldsmith and Johnson. How finely he describes Pope! His elegance of mind, his figure, his character were not unlike his own. He does not resemble a modern Englishman, but puts one in mind of a Roman cardinal or a Spanish inquisitor. I never ate or drank with Mr. Northcote; but I have lived on his conversation with undiminished relish ever since I can remember,—and when I leave it, I come out into the street with feelings lighter and more ethereal than I have at any other time. One of his tête-

à-têtes would at any time make an Essay; but he cannot write himself, because he loses himself, in the connecting passages, is fearful of the effect, and wants the habit of bringing his ideas into one focus or view. A *lens* is necessary to collect the diverging rays, the refracted and broken angular lights of conversation on paper. Contradiction is half the battle in talking—the being startled by what others say, and having to answer on the spot. You have to defend yourself, paragraph by paragraph, parenthesis within parenthesis. Perhaps it might be supposed that a person who excels in conversation and cannot write, would succeed better in dialogue. But the stimulus, the immediate irritation would be wanting; and the work would read flatter than ever, from not having the very thing it pretended to have.

Lively sallies and connected discourse are very different things. There are many persons of that impatient and restless turn of mind, that they cannot wait a moment for a conclusion, or follow up the thread of any argument. In the hurry of conversation their ideas are somehow huddled into sense; but in the intervals of thought, leave a great gap between. Montesquieu said, he often lost an idea before he could find words for it: yet he dictated, by way of saving time, to an amanuensis. This last is, in

my opinion, a vile method, and a solecism in authorship. Horne Tooke, among other paradoxes, used to maintain, that no one could write a good style who was not in the habit of talking and hearing the sound of his own voice. He might as well have said that no one could relish a good style without reading it aloud, as we find common people do to assist their apprehension. But there is a method of trying periods on the ear, or weighing them with the scales of the breath, without any articulate sound. Authors, as they write, may be said to "hear a sound so fine, there's nothing lives 'twixt it and silence." Even musicians generally compose in their heads. I agree that no style is good that is not fit to be spoken or read aloud with effect. This holds true not only of emphasis and cadence, but also with regard to natural idiom and colloquial freedom. Sterne's was in this respect the best style that ever was written. You fancy that you hear the people talking. For a contrary reason, no college-man writes a good style, or understands it when written. Fine writing is with him all verbiage and monotony—a translation into classical centos or hexameter-lines.

That which I have just mentioned is among many instances I could give of ingenious absurdities advanced by Mr. Tooke in the heat and pride of controversy. A person who knew him

well, and greatly admired his talents, said of him that he never (to his recollection) heard him defend an opinion which he thought right, or in which he believed him to be himself sincere. He indeed provoked his antagonists into the toils by the very extravagance of his assertions, and the teasing sophistries by which he rendered them plausible. His temper was prompter to his skill. He had the manners of a man of the world, with great scholastic resources. He flung everyone else off his guard, and was himself immovable. I never knew anyone who did not admit his superiority in this kind of warfare. He put a full-stop to one of Coleridge's long-winded prefatory apologies for his youth and inexperience, by saying abruptly, "Speak up, young man!" and, at another time, silenced a learned professor by desiring an explanation of a word which the other frequently used, and which, he said, he had been many years trying to get at the meaning of,—the copulative *Is*! He was the best intellectual fencer of his day. He made strange havoc of Fuseli's fantastic hieroglyphics, violent humours, and oddity of dialect. Curran, who was sometimes of the same party, was lively and animated in convivial conversation, but dull in argument; nay, averse to anything like reasoning or serious observation, and had the worst taste I ever knew.

His favourite critical topics were to abuse Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. Indeed, he confessed a want of sufficient acquaintance with books when he found himself in literary society in London. He and Sheridan once dined at John Kemble's with Mrs. Inchbald and Mary Woolstonecroft, when the discourse almost wholly turned on Love "from noon to dewy eve, a summer's day!" What a subject! What speakers, and what hearers! What would I not give to have been there, had I not learned it all from the bright eyes of Amaryllis, and may one day make a *Table-talk* of it! Peter Pindar was rich in anecdote and grotesque humour, and profound in technical knowledge both of music, poetry, and painting, but he was gross and overbearing. Wordsworth sometimes talks like a man inspired on subjects of poetry (his own out of the question)—Coleridge well on every subject, and Godwin on none. To finish this subject—Mrs. Montagu's conversation is as fine-cut as her features, and I like to sit in the room with that sort of coronet face. What she says leaves a flavour, like fine green tea. Hunt's is like champagne, and Northcote's like anchovy sandwiches. Haydon's is like a game at trap-ball: Lamb's like snap-dragon: and my own (if I do not mistake the matter) is not very much unlike a

game at ninepins! . . . One source of the conversation of authors is the character of other authors, and on that they are rich indeed. What things they say! What stories they tell of one another, more particularly of their friends! If I durst only give some of these confidential communications! . . . The reader may perhaps think the foregoing a specimen of them—but indeed he is mistaken.

I do not know of any greater impertinence than for an obscure individual to set about pumping a character of celebrity. "Bring him to me," said a Doctor Tronchin, speaking of Rousseau, "that I may see whether he has anything in him." Before you can take measure of the capacity of others, you ought to be sure that they have not taken measure of yours. They may think you a spy on them, and may not like their company. If you really want to know whether another person can talk well, begin by saying a good thing yourself, and you will have a right to look for a rejoinder. "The best tennis-players," says Sir Fopling Flutter, "make the best matches."

For wit is like a rest
Held up at tennis, which men do the best
With the best players.

We hear it often said of a great author, or a great actress, that they are very stupid people

in private. But he was a fool that said so. *Tell me your company, and I'll tell you your manners.* In conversation, as in other things, the action and reaction should bear a certain proportion to each other. Authors may, in some sense, be looked upon as foreigners, who are not naturalized even in their native soil. Lamb once came down into the country to see us.¹ He was "like the most capricious poet Ovid among the Goths." The country people thought him an oddity, and did not understand his jokes. It would be strange if they had; for he did not make any while he stayed. But when we crossed the country to Oxford, then he spoke a little. He and the old colleges were "hail-fellow well met;" and in the quadrangles, he "walked gowned."

There is a character of a gentleman; so there is a character of a scholar, which is no less easily recognised. The one has an air of books about him, as the other has of good-breeding. The one wears his thoughts as the other does his clothes, gracefully; and even if they are a little old-fashioned, they are not ridiculous: they have had their day. The gentleman shows, by his manner, that he has been used to respect from

¹ While the Author and Mrs. Hazlitt were staying at Winter-slow, near Salisbury, in 1809. See *Mem. of W. H.*, i., 172-4.—Ed.

others: the scholar that he lays claim to self-respect and to a certain independence of opinion. The one has been accustomed to the best company; the other has passed his time in cultivating an intimacy with the best authors. There is nothing forward or vulgar in the behaviour of the one; nothing shrewd or petulant in the observations of the other, as if he should astonish the bystanders, or was astonished himself at his own discoveries. Good taste and good sense, like common politeness, are, or are supposed to be, matters of course. One is distinguished by an appearance of marked attention to every one present; the other manifests an habitual air of abstraction and absence of mind. The one is not an upstart, with all the self-important airs of the founder of his own fortune: nor the other a self-taught man, with the repulsive self-sufficiency which arises from an ignorance of what hundreds have known before him. We must excuse perhaps a little conscious family pride in the one, and a little harmless pedantry in the other. As there is a class of the first character which sinks into the mere gentleman, that is, which has nothing but this sense of respectability and propriety to support it—so the character of a scholar not unfrequently dwindles down into the shadow of a shade, till nothing is left of it but the mere

bookworm. There is often something amiable as well as enviable in this last character. I know one such instance, at least. The person I mean has an admiration for learning, if he is only dazzled by its light. He lives among old authors, if he does not enter much into their spirit. He handles the covers, and turns over the page, and is familiar with the names and dates. He is busy and self-involved. He hangs like a film and cobweb upon letters, or is like the dust upon the outside of knowledge, which should not be rudely brushed aside. He follows learning as its shadow; but as such, he is respectable. He browses on the husk and leaves of books, as the young fawn browses on the bark and leaves of trees. Such a one lives all his life in a dream of learning, and has never once had his sleep broken by a real sense of things. He believes implicitly in genius, truth, virtue, liberty, because he finds the names of these things in books. He thinks that love and friendship are the finest things imaginable, both in practice and theory. The legend of good women is to him no fiction. When he steals from the twilight of his cell, the scene breaks upon him like an illuminated missal, and all the people he sees are but so many figures in a *camera obscura*. He reads the world, like a favourite volume, only to find beauties in it,

or like an edition of some old work which he is preparing for the press, only to make emendations in it, and correct the errors that have inadvertently slipped in. He and his dog Tray are much the same honest, simple-hearted, faithful, affectionate creatures—if Tray could but read! His mind cannot take the impression of vice: but the gentleness of his nature turns gall to milk. He would not hurt a fly. He draws the picture of mankind from the guileless simplicity of his own heart. And when he dies, his spirit will take its smiling leave, without having ever had an ill thought of others, or the consciousness of one in itself.

ON THE CONVERSATION OF LORDS

THE conversation of Lords is very different from that of authors. Mounted on horseback, they stick at nothing in the chase, and clear everything with flying leaps, while we poor devils have no chance of keeping up with them with our clouten shoes and long hunting poles. They have all the benefit of education, society, confidence, they read books, purchase pictures, breed horses, learn to ride, dance, and fence, look after their estates, travel abroad:—authors have none of these advantages, or inlets of knowledge, to assist them, except one, reading; and this is still more impoverished and clouded by the painful exercise of their own thoughts. The knowledge of the Great has a character of wealth and property in it, like the stores of the rich merchant or manufacturer, who lays his hands on all within his reach: the understanding of the student is like the workshop of the mechanic, who has nothing but what he himself creates. How difficult is the production, how small the display in the one case compared to the other! Most of Correggio's designs are con-

tained in one small room at Parma: how different from the extent and variety of some hereditary and princely collections!

The human mind has a trick (probably a very natural and consoling one) of striking a balance between the favours of wisdom and of fortune, and of making one thing a gratuitous and convenient foil to another. Whether this is owing to envy or to a love of justice, I will not say: but whichever it is owing to, I must own I do not think it well founded. A scholar is without money: therefore (to make the odds even) we argue (not very wisely) that a rich man must be without ideas. This does not follow. "The wise is father to that thought;" and the thought is a spurious one. We might as well pretend, that because a man has the advantage of us in height, he is not strong or in good health; or because a woman is handsome, she is not at the same time young, accomplished and well-bred. Our fastidious self-love or our rustic prejudices may revolt at the accumulation of advantages in others; but we must learn to submit to the mortifying truth, which every day's experience points out, with what grace we may. There were those who grudged to Lord Byron the name of a poet because he was of noble birth; as he himself could not endure the phrase bestowed upon Wordsworth, whom he

considered as a clown. He carried this weakness so far that he even seemed to regard it as a piece of presumption in Shakespeare *to be preferred before him* as a dramatic author, and contended that Milton's writing an epic poem and the "Answer to Salmasius" was entirely owing to vanity—so little did he relish the superiority of the old blind school-master. So it is that one part would arrogate every advantage to themselves, while those on the other side would detract from all in their rivals that they do not themselves possess. Some will not have the statue painted; others can see no beauty in the clay model!

The man of rank and fortune, besides his chance for the common or (now and then) an uncommon share of wit and understanding, has it in his power to avail himself of everything that is to be taught of art and science; he has tutors and valets at his beck; he may master the dead languages, he *must* acquire the modern ones; he moves in the highest circles, and may descend to the lowest; the paths of pleasure, of ambition, of knowledge, are open to him; he may devote himself to a particular study, or skim the cream of all; he may read books or men or things, as he finds most convenient or agreeable; he is not forced to confine his attention to some one dry uninteresting pursuit; he

has a single *hobby*, or half a dozen; he is not distracted by care, by poverty and want of leisure; he has every opportunity and facility afforded him for acquiring various accomplishments of body or mind, and every encouragement, from confidence and success, for making an imposing display of them; he may laugh with the gay, jest with the witty, argue with the wise; he has been in courts, in colleges, and camps, is familiar with playhouses and taverns, with the riding-house and the dissecting-room, has been present at or taken part in the debates of both Houses of Parliament, was in the O. P. row, and is deep in the Fancy, understands the broadsword exercise, is a connoisseur in regimentals, plays the whole game at whist, is a tolerable proficient at backgammon, drives four-in-hand, skates, rows, swims, shoots; knows the different sorts of game and modes of agriculture in the different counties of England, the manufactures and commerce of the different towns, the politics of Europe, the campaigns in Spain, has the *Gazette*, the newspapers, and reviews at his fingers' ends, has visited the finest scenes of Nature and beheld the choicest works of Art, and is in society where he is continually hearing or talking of all these things; and yet we are surprised to find that a person so circumstanced and qualified has any ideas to communi-

cate or words to express himself, and is not, as by patent and prescription he was bound to be, a mere well-dressed fop of fashion or a booby lord! It would be less remarkable if a poor author, who has none of this giddy range and scope of information, who pores over the page till it fades from his sight, and refines upon his style till the words stick in his throat, should be dull as a beetle and mute as a fish, instead of spontaneously pouring out a volume of wit and wisdom on every subject that can be started.

An author lives out of the world, or mixes chiefly with those of his own class; which renders him pedantic and pragmatistical, or gives him a reserved, hesitating, and interdicted manner. A lord or gentleman-commoner goes into the world, and this imparts that fluency, spirit, and freshness to his conversation, which arises from the circulation of ideas and from the greater animation and excitement of unrestrained intercourse. An author's tongue is tied for want of somebody to speak to: his ideas rust and become obscured, from not being brought out in company and exposed to the gaze of instant admiration. A lord has always someone at hand on whom he can "bestow his tediousness," and grows voluble, copious, inexhaustible in consequence: his wit is polished, and the flowers of his oratory expanded by his smiling commerce

with the world, like the figures in tapestry, that after being thrust into a corner and folded up in closets, are displayed on festival and gala-days. Again, the man of fashion, and fortune reduces many of those arts and mysteries to practice, of which the scholar gains all his knowledge from books and vague description. Will not the rules of architecture find a readier reception and sink deeper into the mind of the proprietor of a noble mansion, or of him who means to build one, than of the half-starved occupier of a garret? Will not the political economist's insight into Mr. Ricardo's doctrine of Rent, or Mr. Malthus' theory of Population, be vastly quickened by the circumstance of his possessing a large landed estate and having to pay enormous poor-rates? And, in general, is it not self-evident that a man's knowledge of the true interests of the country will be enlarged just in proportion to the *stake* he has in it? A person may have read accounts of different cities and the customs of different nations: but will this give him the same accurate idea of the situation of celebrated places, of the aspect and manners of the inhabitants, or the same lively impulse and ardour and fund of striking particulars in expatiating upon them, as if he had run over half the countries of Europe, for no other purpose than to satisfy his own curiosity,

and excite that of others on his return. I many years ago looked into the Duke of Newcastle's "Treatise on Horsemanship"; all I remember of it is some quaint cuts of the Duke and his riding-master introduced to illustrate the lessons. Had I myself possessed a stud of Arabian coursers, with grooms and a master of the horse to assist me in reducing these precepts to practice they would have made a stronger impression on my mind; and what interested myself from vanity or habit, I could have made interesting to others. I am sure I could have learnt to *ride the Great Horse*, and do twenty other things, in the time I have employed in endeavouring to make something out of nothing, or in conning the same problem fifty times over, as monks count over their beads! I have occasionally in my life bought a few prints, and hung them up in my room with great satisfaction; but is it to be supposed possible, from this casual circumstance, that I should compete in taste or in the knowledge of *virtu* with a peer of the realm, who has in his possession the costly designs, or a wealthy commoner, who has spent half his fortune in learning to distinguish copies from originals? "A question not to be asked!" Nor is it likely that the having dipped into the Memoirs of Count Grammont, or of Lady Vane in Peregrine Pickle, should enable anyone to

sustain a conversation on subjects of love and gallantry with the same ease, grace, brilliancy, and spirit as the having been engaged in a hundred adventures of one's own, or heard the scandal and tittle-tattle of fashionable life for the last thirty years canvassed a hundred times. Books may be manufactured from other books by some dull mechanical process: it is conversation and the access to the best society that alone fit us for society; or "the act and practice part of life must be the mistress to our theorique," before we can hope to shine in mixed company, or bend our previous knowledge to ordinary and familiar uses out of that plaster-cast mould which is as brittle as it is formal."

There is another thing which tends to produce the same effect, viz., that lords and gentlemen seldom trouble themselves about the knotty and uninviting parts of a subject: they leave it to "the dregs of earth" to drain the cup or find the bottom. They are attracted by the frothy and sparkling. If a question puzzles them, or is not likely to amuse others, they leave it to its fate, or to those whose business it is to contend with difficulty, and to pursue truth for its own sake. They string together as many available *off-hand* topics as they can procure for love or money; and aided by a good person or address, sport them with very considerable effect at the

next rout or party they go to. They do not bore you with pedantry, or tease you with sophistry. Their conversation is not made up of *moot-points* or *choke-pears*. They do not willingly forego "the feast of reason or the flow of soul" to grub up some solitary truth or dig for hid treasures. They are amateurs, not professors; the patrons, not the drudges of knowledge. An author loses half his life and *stultifies* his faculties, in hopes to find out something which perhaps neither he nor anyone else can ever find out. For this he neglects half a hundred acquirements, half a hundred accomplishments. *Aut Caesar aut nihil*. He is proud of the discovery or of the fond pursuit of one truth—a lord is vain of a thousand ostentatious commonplaces. If the latter ever devotes himself to some crabbed study, or sets about finding out the longitude, he is then to be looked upon as a humorist if he fails—a genius if he succeeds—and no longer belongs to the class I have been speaking of.

Perhaps a multiplicity of attainments and pursuits is not very favourable to their selectness; as a local and personal acquaintance with objects of imagination takes away from, instead of adding to their romantic interest. Familiarity is said to breed contempt; or at any rate, the being brought into contact with places, persons, or things that we have hitherto only heard

or read of, removes a certain aerial delicious veil of refinement from them, and strikes at that ideal abstraction, which is the charm and boast of a life conversant chiefly among books. The huddling a number of tastes and studies together tends to degrade and vulgarise each, and to give a crude unconcocted, dissipated turn to the mind. Instead of stuffing it full of gross, palpable, immediate objects of excitement, a wiser plan would be to leave something in reserve, something hovering in airy space to draw our attention out of ourselves, to excite hope, curiosity, wonder, and never to satisfy it. The great art is not to throw a glare of light upon all objects, or to lay the whole extended landscape bare at one view; but so to manage as to see the more amiable side of things, and through the narrow vistas and loop-holes of retreat,

‘Catch glimpses that may make us less forlorn.’

I hate to annihilate air and distance by the perpetual use of an opera-glass, to run everything into foreground, and to interpose no medium between the thought and the object. The breath of words stirs and plays idly with the gossamer web of fancy: the touch of things destroys it. I have seen a good deal of authors: and I believe that they (as well as I) would quite as lieve I had not. Places I have seen,

too, that did not answer my expectation. Pictures (that is, some few of them) are the only things that are the better for our having studied them "face to face, not in a glass darkly," and that in themselves surpass any description we can give, or any notion we can form of them. But I do not think seriously, after all, that those who possess are the best judges of them. They become furniture, property in their hands. The purchasers look to the price they will fetch, or turn to that which they have cost. They consider not the beauty or expression, but the workmanship, the date, the pedigree, the school—something that will figure in the description in a catalogue or in a puff in a newspaper. They are blinded by silly admiration of whatever belongs to themselves, and warped so as to eye "with jealous leer malign" all that is not theirs. Taste is melted down in the crucible of avarice and vanity, and leaves a wretched *caput mortuum* of podantry and conceit. As to books, they "best can feel them who have read them most," and who rely on them for their only support and their only chance of distinction. They most keenly relish the graces of style who have in vain tried to make them their own: they alone understand the value of a thought who have gone through the trouble of thinking. The privation of other advantages is not

a clear loss, if it is counterbalanced by a proportionable concentration and unity of interest in what is left. The love of letters is the forlorn hope of the man of letters. His ruling passion is the love of fame. A member of the Roxburgh Club has a certain work (let it be the *Decameron* of Boccaccio) splendidly bound, and in the old quarto edition, we will say. In this not only his literary taste is gratified, but the pride of property, the love of external elegance and decoration. The poor student has only a paltry and somewhat worn copy of the same work (or perhaps only a translation) which he picked up at a stall, standing out of a shower of rain. What then! has not the Noble Virtuoso doubly the advantage, and a much higher pleasure in the perusal of the work? No, for these are vulgar and mechanical helps to the true enjoyment of letters. From all this mock-display and idle parade of binding and arms and dates, his unthought-of rival is precluded, and sees only the talismanic words, feels only the spirit of the author, and in that author reads "with sparkling eyes"

‘His title to a mansion in the skies.’

Oh! divine air of learning, fanned by the undying breath of genius, still let me taste thee, free from all adventitious admixtures,

‘Pure in the last recesses of the soul.’

We are far at present from the style of Swift’s “Polite Conversation.” The fashionable tone has quite changed in this respect, and almost gone into the opposite extreme. At that period, the polite world seems to have been nearly at a stand, in a state of intellectual *abeyance*; or in the interval between the disuse of chivalrous exercises and the introduction of modern philosophy, not to have known how to pass its time and to have sunk into the most commonplace formality and unmeaning apathy. But lo! at a signal given, or rather prompted by that most powerful of all calls, the want of something to do, all rush into the lists, having armed themselves anew with the shining panoply of science and of letters, with an eagerness, a perseverance, a dexterity, and a success that are truly astonishing. The higher classes have of late taken the lead almost as much in arts as they formerly did in arms, when the last one was the only prescribed mode of distinguishing themselves from the rabble whom they treated as serfs and churls. The prevailing cue at present is to regard mere authors (who are not also of gentle blood) as dull, illiterate, poor creatures, a sort of pretenders to taste and elegance, and adventurers in intellect. The true adepts in black-letter are knights of the shire:

the sworn patentees of Parnassus are Peers of the Realm. Not to pass for a literary quack, you must procure a diploma from the College of Heralds. A dandy conceals a bibliomanist: our belles are *blue-stockings*. The press is so entirely monopolised by beauty, birth, or importance in the State, that an author by profession resigns the field to the crowd of well-dressed competitors, out of modesty or pride, is fain to keep out of sight—

‘Or write by stealth and blush to find it fame!’

Lord Byron used to boast that he could bring forward a dozen young men of fashion who could beat all the regular authors at their several weapons of wit or argument; and though I demur to the truth of the assertion, yet there is no saying till the thing is tried. Young gentlemen make *very pretty sparrers*, but are not “the ugliest customers” when they take off the gloves. Lord Byron himself was, in his capacity of author, an out-and-outer; but then it was at the expense of other things, for he could not talk except in short sentences and sarcastic allusions, he had no ready resources; all his ideas moulded themselves into stanzas, and all his ardour was carried off in rhyme. The channel of his pen was worn deep by habit and power; the current of his thoughts flowed strong in it,

and nothing remained to supply the neighbouring flats and shallows of miscellaneous conversation, but a few sprinklings of wit or gushes of spleen. An intense purpose concentrated and gave a determined direction to his energies, that "held on their way, unslacked of motion." The track of his genius was like a volcanic eruption, a torrent of burning lava, full of heat and splendour and headlong fury, that left all dry, cold, hard, and barren behind it! To say nothing of a host of female authors, a bright galaxy above our heads, there is no young lady of fashion in the present day, scarce a boarding-school girl, that is not mistress of as many branches of knowledge as would set up half-a-dozen literary hacks. In lieu of the sampler and the plain-stitch of our grandmothers, they have so many hours for French, so many for Italian, so many for English grammar and composition, so many for geography and the use of the globes, so many for history, so many for botany, so many for painting, music, dancing, riding, etc. One almost wonders how so many studies are crammed into the twenty-four hours; or how such fair and delicate creatures can master them without spoiling the smoothness of their brows, the sweetness of their tempers, or the graceful simplicity of their manners. A girl learns French (not only to read, but to

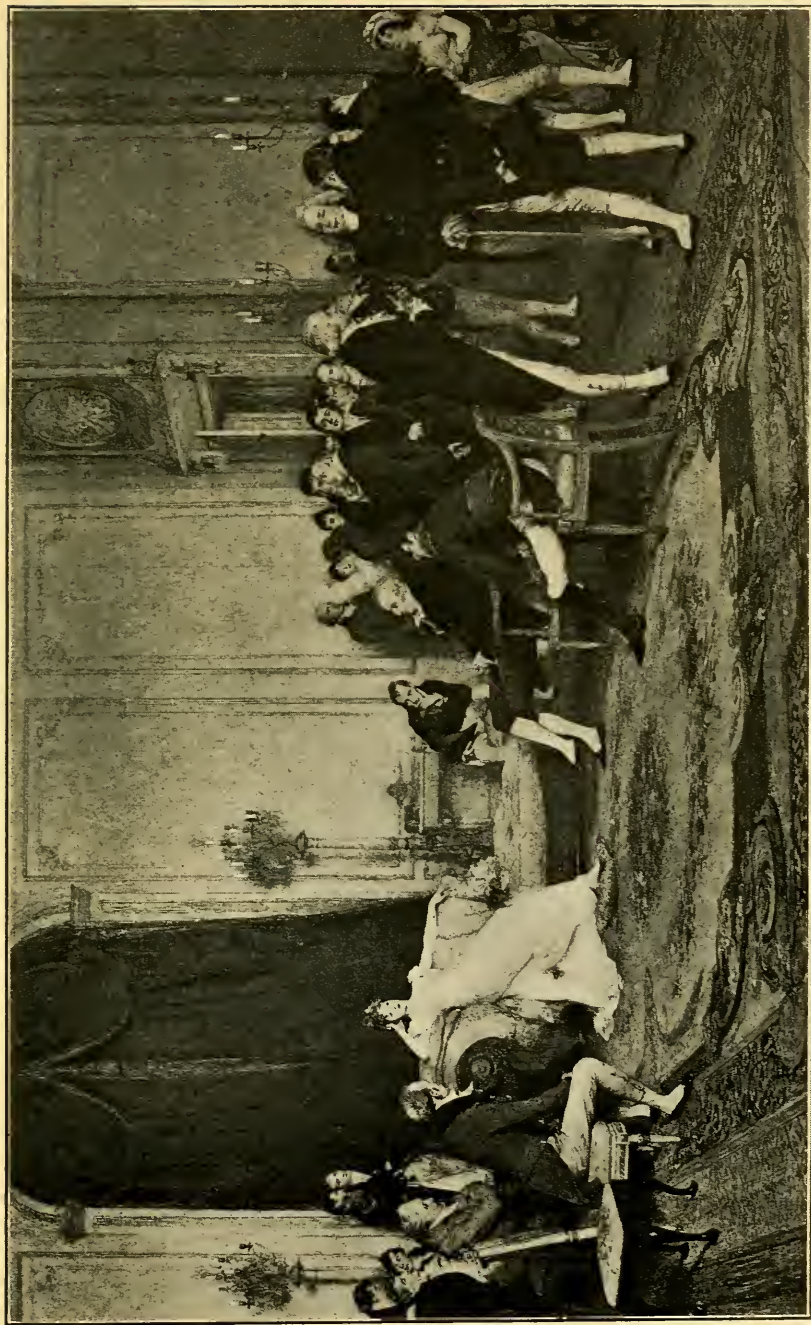
speak it) in a few months, while a boy is as many years in learning to construe Latin. Why so? Chiefly because the one is treated as a *bagatelle* or agreeable relaxation; the other as a serious task or necessary evil. Education, a very few years back, was looked upon as a hardship, and enforced by menaces and blows, instead of being carried on (as now) as an amusement and under the garb of pleasure, and with the allurements of self-love. It is found that the products of the mind flourish better and shoot up more quickly in the sunshine of good humour and in the air of freedom, than under the frowns of sullenness, or the shackles of authority. "The labour we delight in physics pain." The idlest people are not those who have most leisure time to dispose of as they choose: take away the feeling of compulsion, and you supply a motive for application, by converting a toil into a pleasure. This makes nearly all the difference between the hardest drudgery and the most delightful exercise—not the degree of exertion, but the motive and the accompanying sensation. Learning does not gain proselytes by the austerity or awfulness of its looks. By representing things as so difficult, and as exacting such dreadful sacrifices, and to be acquired under such severe penalties, we not only deter the student from the attempt, but lay

a dead-weight upon the imagination, and destroy that cheerfulness and alacrity of spirit which is the spring of thought and action. But to return—An author by profession reads a few works that he intends to criticise and cut up “for a consideration,”—a *blue-stocking* by profession reads all that comes out to pass the time or satisfy her curiosity. The author has something to say about Fielding, Richardson, or even the Scotch novels: but he is soon distanced by the fair critic or overwhelmed with the contents of whole Circulating Libraries poured out upon his head without stint or intermission. He reads for an object and to live; she for the sake of reading or to talk. Be this as it may, the idle reader at present reads twenty times as many books as the learned one. The former skims the surface of knowledge, and carries away the striking points and a variety of amusing details, while the latter reserves himself for great occasions, or perhaps does nothing under the pretence of having so much to do.

‘From every work he challenges *essoine*,
For contemplation’s sake.’

The *literati* of Europe threaten at present to become the Monks of letters, and from having taken up learning as a profession, to live on the reputation of it. As gentlemen have turned

authors, authors seem inclined to turn gentlemen; and enjoying the *otium cum dignitate*, to be much too refined and abstracted to condescend to the subordinate or mechanical parts of knowledge. They are too wise in general to be acquainted with anything in particular; and remain in a proud and listless ignorance of all that is within the reach of the vulgar. They are not, as of old, walking libraries or Encyclopædias, but rather certain faculties of the mind personified. They scorn the material and instrumental branches of inquiry, the husk and bran, and affect only the fine flour of literature—they are only to be called in to give the last polish to style, the last refinement to thought. They leave it to their drudges, the Reading Public, to accumulate the facts, to arrange the evidence, to make out the data, and like great painters whose pupils have got in the groundwork and the established proportions of a picture, come forward to go over the last thin glazing of the colors, or throw in the finer touches of expression. On my excusing myself to N—— for some blunder in history, by saying, “I really had not time to read,”—he said, “No, but you have time to write!” And once a celebrated critic taking me to task as to the subject of my pursuits, and receiving regularly the same answer to his queries, that I knew noth-



After the painting by William Q. Orchardson.

The Salon of Madame Récamier.

ing of chemistry, nothing of astronomy, of botany, of law, of politics, etc., at last exclaimed somewhat impatiently—"What the devil is it, then, you *do* know?" I laughed and was not very much disconcerted at the reproof, as it was just.

Modern men of letters may be divided into three classes; the mere scholar or *book-worm*, all whose knowledge is taken from books, and who may be passed by as an obsolete character, little inquired after—the literary *hack* or coffee-house politician, who gets his information mostly from hearsay, and who makes some noise indeed, but the echo of it does not reach beyond his own club or circle—and the man of real or of pretended genius, who aims to draw upon his own resources of thought or feeling, and to throw a new light upon nature and books. This last personage (if he acts up to his supposed character) has too much to do to lend himself to a variety of pursuits, or to lay himself out to please in all companies. He has a task in hand, a vow to perform; and he cannot be diverted from it by incidental or collateral objects. All the time that he does not devote to this paramount duty he should have to himself, to repose, to lie fallow, to gather strength and recruit himself. A boxer is led into the lists that he may not waste a particle of vigor

needlessly; and a leader in Parliament, on the day that he is expected to get up a grand attack or defence, is not to be pestered with the ordinary news of the day. So an author (who is, or would be thought, original) has no time for spare accomplishments or ornamental studies. All that he intermeddles with must be marshalled to bear upon his purpose. He must be acquainted with books and the thoughts of others, but only so far as to assist him on his way, and "to take progression from them." He starts from the point where *they* left off. All that does not aid him in his new career goes for nothing, is thrown out of the account; or is a useless and splendid incumbrance. Most of his time he passes in brooding over some wayward hint or suggestion of a thought, nor is he bound to give any explanation of what he does with the rest. He tries to melt down truth into essences—to express some fine train of feeling, to solve some difficult problem, to start what is new, or to perfect what is old; in a word, not to do what others can do (which in the division of mental labour he holds to be unnecessary), but to do what they all with their joint efforts cannot do. For this he is in no hurry, and must have the disposal of his leisure and the choice of his subject. The public can wait. He

deems with a living poet, who is an example of his own doctrine—

——‘That there are powers
Which of themselves our minds impress;
That we can feed this mind of ours
In a wise passiveness.’

Or I have sometimes thought that the dalliance of the mind with Fancy or with Truth might be described almost in the words of Andrew Marvell’s address “To his Coy Mistress:”—

‘Had we but world enough and time,
This toying, Lady, were no crime;
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk and pass our love’s long day.
Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side
Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide
Of Humber would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the flood;
And you should, if you please, refuse
Till the conversion of the Jews.
My contemplative love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow.
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;
Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest;
An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart;

For, lady, you deserve this state;
Nor would I love at lower rate!

The aspiring poet or prose writer undertakes to do a certain thing; and if he succeeds, it is enough. While he is intent upon that or asleep, others may amuse themselves how they can with any topic that happens to be afloat and all the eloquence they are masters of, so that they do not disturb the champion of truth, or the proclaimer of beauty to the world. The Conversation of Lords, on the contrary, is to this like a newspaper to a book—the latter treats well or ill of one subject, and leads to a conclusion on one point; the other is made up of all sorts of things jumbled together, debates in parliament, law-reports, plays, operas, concerts, routs, levees, fashions, actions, the last fight, foreign news, deaths, marriages, and *crim-cons*, bankruptcies, and quack medicines; and a large allowance is frequently to be made, besides the natural confusion of the subjects, for *cross-readings* in the speaker's mind.¹ Or, to take another illustra-

¹ As when a person asks you "whether you do not find a strong resemblance between Rubens's pictures and Quarles's poetry"—which is owing to the critics having lately been at Antwerp and bought an edition of Quarles's Emblems. Odd combinations must take place where a number of ideas are brought together, with only a thin, hasty partition between them, and without a sufficient quantity of judgment to discriminate. An Englishman, of some apparent consequence passing by the St. Peter Martyr of Titian at Venice, observed, "It was a copy of

tion, fashionable conversation has something theatrical or *melo-dramatic* in it; it is got up for immediate effect, it is calculated to make a great display, there is a profusion of paint, scenery, and dresses, the music is loud, there are banquets and processions, you have the dancers from the Opera, the horses from Astley's, and the elephant from Exeter 'Change, the stage is all life, bustle, noise and glare, the audience brilliant and delighted, and the whole goes off in a blaze of phosphorus; but the dialogue is poor, the story improbable, the critics shake their heads in the pit, and the next day the piece is *damned!*

In short, a man of rank and fortune takes the adventitious and ornamental part of letters, the obvious, popular, fashionable, that serves to amuse at the time, or minister to the cravings of vanity, without laying a very heavy tax on his own understanding, or the patience of his hearers. He furnishes his mind as he does his house,

the same subject by Domenchino at Bologna." This betrayed an absolute ignorance both of Titian and of Domenchino, and of the whole world of art: yet unless I had also seen the St. Peter at Bologna, this connoisseur would have had the advantage of me, two to one, and might have disputed the precedence of the two pictures with me, but that chronology would have come to my aid. Thus people who travel from place to place and roam from subject to subject, make up by the extent and discursiveness of their knowledge for the want of truth and refinement in their conception of the objects of it.

with what is showy, striking, and of the newest pattern: he mounts his *hobby* as he does his horse, which is brought to his door for an airing, and which (should it prove restive or sluggish) he turns away for another; or like a child at a fair, gets into a round-about of knowledge, till his head becomes giddy, runs from sight to sight, from booth to booth, and like the child goes home loaded with trinkets, gew-gaws, and rattles. He does not pore and pine over an idea (like some poor hypochondriac) till it becomes impracticable, unsociable, incommunicable, absorbed in mysticism, and lost in minuteness: he is not upon oath never to utter anything but oracles, but rattles away in a fine careless hair-brained dashing manner, hit or miss, and succeeds the better for it. Nor does he pore over the same stale round of politics and the state of the nation (with the coffee-house politician) but launches out with freedom and gaiety into whatever has attraction and interest in it, "runs the great circle, and is still at home." He is inquisitive, garrulous, credulous, sanguine, florid,—neither pedantic nor vulgar. Neither is he intolerant, exclusive, bigoted to one set of opinions or one class of individuals. He clothes an abstract theory with illustrations from his own experience and observation, hates what is dry and dull, and throws in an air of

high health, buoyant spirits, fortune and splendid connections to give animation and vividness to what perhaps might otherwise want it. He selects what is palpable without being gross or trivial, lends it colour from the flush of success, and elevation from the distinctions of rank. He runs on and never stops for an answer, rather dictating to others than endeavouring to ascertain their opinions, solving his own questions, improving upon their hints, and bearing down or precluding opposition by a good-natured loquacity or stately dogmatism. All this is perhaps more edifying as a subject of speculation than delightful in itself. Shakespeare somewhere says—"man's mind is parcel of his fortunes,"—and I think the inference will be borne out in the present case. I should guess that in the prevailing tone of fashionable society or aristocratic literature would be found all that variety, splendour, facility, and startling effect which corresponds with external wealth, magnificence of appearance, and a command of opportunity; while there would be wanting whatever depends chiefly on intensity of pursuit, on depth of feeling, and on simplicity and independence of mind joined with straitened fortune. Prosperity is a great teacher; adversity is a greater. Possession pampers the mind; privation trains and strength-

ens it. Accordingly, we find but one really great name (Lord Bacon) in this rank of English society, where superiority is taken for granted, and reflected from outward circumstances. The rest are in the second class. Lord Bolingbroke, whom Pope idolized (and it pains me that all his idols are not mine) was a boastful empty mouther! I never knew till the other day that Lord Bolingbroke was the model on which Mr. Pitt formed himself. He was his *Magnus Apollo*; and no wonder. The late Minister used to lament it as the great desideratum of English literature, that there was no record anywhere existing of his speeches as they were spoken, and declared that he would give any price for one of them reported as speeches were reported in the newspapers in our time. Being asked which he thought the best of his written productions, he would answer, raising his eyebrows and deepening the tones of his voice to a sonorous bass—"Why, undoubtedly, Sir, the Letter to Sir William Wyndham is the most masterly of all his writings, and the first composition for wit and eloquence in the English language;"—and then he would give his reasons at great length and *con amore*, and say that Junius had formed himself entirely upon it. Lord Bolingbroke has, it seems, a house

next-door to one belonging to Lord Chatham at Walham-Green; and as the gardens joined they could hear Lord Bolingbroke walking out with the company that came to see him in his retirement, and elaborately declaiming politics to the old lords and statesmen that were with him, and philosophy to the younger ones. Pitt learned this story from his father when a boy. This account, interesting in itself, was to me the more interesting and extraordinary, as it had always appeared to me that Mr. Pitt was quite an original *sui generis*,

‘As if a man were author of himself,
And owned no other kin’—

that so far from having a model or idol he looked up to and grounded himself upon, he had neither admiration nor consciousness of anything existing out of himself, and that he lived solely in the sound of his own voice and revolved in the circle of his own hollow and artificial periods. I have it from the same authority that he thought Cobbett the best writer and Horne Tooke the cleverest man of the day. His hatred of Wyndham was excessive and mutual.—Perhaps it may be said that Lord Chatham was a first-rate man in his way, and I incline to think it; but he was a self-made man, bred in a

camp, not in a court, and his rank was owing to his talents.¹

¹ There are few things more contemptible than the conversation of mere *men of the town*. It is made up of the technicalities and cant of all professions, without the spirit or knowledge of any. It is flashy and vapid, or is like the rinsings of different liquors at a night-cellar instead of a bottle of fine old port. It is without body or clearness, and a heap of affectation. In fact, I am very much of the opinion of that old Scotch gentleman who owned that "he preferred the dullest book he had ever read to the most brilliant conversation it had ever fallen to his lot to hear!"

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

TRUTH OF INTERCOURSE

(*From "Virginibus Puerisque"*)

TRUTH OF INTERCOURSE

AMONG sayings that have a currency in spite of being wholly false upon the face of them for the sake of a half-truth upon another subject which is accidentally combined with the error, one of the grossest and broadest conveys the monstrous proposition that it is easy to tell the truth and hard to tell a lie. I wish heartily it were. But the truth is one; it has first to be discovered, then justly and exactly uttered. Even with instruments specially contrived for such a purpose—with a foot rule, a level, or a theodolite—it is not easy to be exact; it is easier, alas! to be inexact. From those who mark the divisions on a scale to those who measure the boundaries of empires or the distance of the heavenly stars, it is by careful method and minute, unwearying attention that men rise even to material exactness or to sure knowledge even of external and constant things. But it is easier to draw the outline of a mountain than the changing appearance of a face; and truth in human relations is of this more intangible and dubious order: hard to seize, harder to communicate.

Veracity to facts in a loose, colloquial sense—not to say that I have been in Malabar when as a matter of fact I was never out of England, not to say that I have read Cervantes in the original when as a matter of fact I know not one syllable of Spanish—this, indeed, is easy and to the same degree unimportant in itself. Lies of this sort, according to circumstances, may or may not be important; in a certain sense even they may or may not be false. The habitual liar may be a very honest fellow, and live truly with his wife and friends; while another man who never told a formal falsehood in his life may yet be himself one lie—heart and face, from top to bottom. This is the kind of lie which poisons intimacy. And, *vice versa*, veracity to sentiment, truth in a relation, truth to your own heart and your friends, never to feign or falsify emotion—that is the truth which makes love possible and mankind happy.

L'art de bien dire is but a drawing-room accomplishment unless it be pressed into the service of the truth. The difficulty of literature is not to write, but to write what you mean; not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish. This is commonly understood in the case of books or set orations; even in making your will, or writing an explicit letter, some difficulty is admitted by the world. But one

thing you can never make Philistine natures understand; one thing, which yet lies on the surface, remains as unseizable to their wits as a high flight of metaphysics—namely, that the business of life is mainly carried on by means of this difficult art of literature, and according to a man's proficiency in that art shall be the freedom and the fulness of his intercourse with other men. Anybody, it is supposed, can say what he means; and, in spite of their notorious experience to the contrary, people so continue to suppose. Now, I simply open the last book I have been reading—Mr. Leland's captivating *English Gipsies*. "It is said," I find on p. 7, "that those who can converse with Irish peasants in their own native tongue form far higher opinions of their appreciation of the beautiful, and of *the elements of humour and pathos in their hearts*, than do those who know their thoughts only through the medium of English. I know from my own observations that this is quite the case with the Indians of North America, and it is unquestionably so with the gipsy." In short, where a man has not a full possession of the language, the most important, because the most amiable, qualities of his nature have to lie buried and fallow; for the pleasure of comradeship, and the intellectual part of love, rest upon these very "elements of

humour and pathos." Here is a man opulent in both, and for lack of a medium he can put none of it out to interest in the market of affection! But what is thus made plain to our apprehensions in the case of a foreign language is partially true even with the tongue we learned in childhood. Indeed, we all speak different dialects; one shall be copious and exact, another loose and meagre; but the speech of the ideal talker shall correspond and fit upon the truth of fact—not clumsily, obscuring lineaments, like a mantle, but cleanly adhering, like an athlete's skin. And what is the result? That the one can open himself more clearly to his friends, and can enjoy more of what makes life truly valuable—intimacy with those he loves. An orator makes a false step; he employs some trivial, some absurd, some vulgar phrase; in turn of a sentence he insults, by a side wind, those whom he is labouring to charm; in speaking to one sentiment he unconsciously ruffles another in parenthesis; and you are not surprised, for you know his task to be delicate and filled with perils. "O frivolous mind of man, light ignorance!" As if yourself, when you seek to explain some misunderstanding or excuse some apparent fault, speaking swiftly and addressing a mind still recently incensed, were not harnessing for a more perilous adven-

ture; as if yourself required less tact and eloquence; as if an angry friend or a suspicious lover were not more easy to offend than a meeting of indifferent politicians! Nay, and the orator treads in a beaten round; the matters he discusses have been discussed a thousand times before; language is ready-shaped to his purpose; he speaks out of a cut and dry vocabulary. But you—may it not be that your defence reposes on some subtlety of feeling, not so much as touched upon in Shakespeare, to express which, like a pioneer, you must venture forth into zones of thought still unsurveyed, and become yourself a literary innovator? For even in love there are unlovely humours; ambiguous acts, unpardonable words, may yet have sprung from a kind sentiment. If the injured one could read your heart, you may be sure that he would understand and pardon; but, alas! the heart cannot be shown—it has to be demonstrated in words. Do you think it is a hard thing to write poetry? Why, that is to write poetry, and of a high, if not the highest, order.

I should even more admire “the lifelong and heroic literary labours” of my fellow-men, patiently clearing up in words their loves and their contentions, and speaking their autobiography daily to their wives, were it not for a circumstance which lessens their difficulty and

my admiration by equal parts. For life, though largely, is not entirely carried on by literature. We are subject to physical passions and contortions; the voice breaks and changes, and speaks by unconscious and winning inflections; we have legible countenances, like an open book; things that cannot be said look eloquently through the eyes; and the soul, not locked into the body as a dungeon, dwells ever on the threshold with appealing signals. Groans and tears, looks and gestures, a flush or a paleness, are often the most clear reporters of the heart, and speak more directly to the hearts of others. The message flies by these interpreters in the least space of time, and the misunderstanding is averted in the moment of its birth. To explain in words takes time and a just and patient hearing; and in the critical epochs of a close relation, patience and justice are not qualities on which we can rely. But the look or the gesture explains things in a breath; they tell their message without ambiguity; unlike speech, they cannot stumble, by the way, on a reproach or an illusion that should steel your friend against the truth; and then they have a higher authority, for they are the direct expression of the heart, not yet transmitted through the unfaithful and sophisticating brain. Not long ago I wrote a letter to a friend which came near involving us

in quarrel; but we met, and in personal talk I repeated the worst of what I had written, and added worse to that; and with the commentary of the body it seemed not unfriendly either to hear or say. Indeed, letters are in vain for the purposes of intimacy; an absence is a dead break in the relation; yet two who know each other fully and are bent on perpetuity in love, may so preserve the attitude of their affections that they may meet on the same terms as they had parted.

Pitiful is the case of the blind, who cannot read the face; pitiful that of the deaf, who cannot follow the changes of the voice. And there are others also to be pitied; for there are some of an inert, uneloquent nature, who have been denied all the symbols of communication, who have neither a lively play of facial expression, nor speaking gestures, nor a responsive voice, nor yet the gift of frank, explanatory speech: people truly made of clay, people tied for life into a bag which no one can undo. They are poorer than the gipsy, for their heart can speak no language under heaven. Such people we must learn slowly by the tenor of their acts, or through yea and nay communications; or we take them on trust on the strength of a general air, and now and again, when we see the spirit breaking through in a flash, correct or change

our estimate. But these will be uphill intimacies, without charm or freedom, to the end; and freedom is the chief ingredient in confidence. Some minds, romantically dull, despise physical endowments. That is a doctrine for a misanthrope; to those who like their fellow-creatures it must always be meaningless; and, for my part, I can see few things more desirable, after the possession of such radical qualities as honour and humour and pathos, than to have a lively and not a stolid countenance; to have looks to correspond with every feeling; to be elegant and delightful in person, so that we shall please even in the intervals of active pleasing, and may never discredit speech with uncouth manners or become unconsciously our own burlesques. But of all unfortunates there is one creature (for I will not call him man) conspicuous in misfortune. This is he who has forfeited his birthright of expression, who has cultivated artful intonations, who has taught his face tricks, like a pet monkey, and on every side perverted or cut off his means of communication with his fellow-men. The body is a house of many windows: there we all sit, showing ourselves and crying on the passers-by to come and love us. But this fellow has filled his windows with opaque glass, elegantly coloured. His house may be admired for its design, the

crowd may pause before the stained windows, but meanwhile the poor proprietor must lie languishing within, un comforted, unchangeably alone.

Truth of intercourse is something more difficult than to refrain from open lies. It is possible to avoid falsehood and yet not tell the truth. It is not enough to answer formal questions. To reach the truth by *yea* and *nay* communications implies a questioner with a share of inspiration, such as is often found in mutual love. *Yea* and *nay* mean nothing; the meaning must have been related in the question. Many words are often necessary to convey a very simple statement; for in this sort of exercise we never hit the gold; the most that we can hope is by many arrows, more or less far off on different sides, to indicate, in the course of time, for what target we are aiming, and after an hour's talk, back and forward, to convey the purport of a single principle or a single thought. And yet while the curt, pithy speaker misses the point entirely, a wordy, prolegomenous babbler will often add three new offences in the process of excusing one. It is really a most delicate affair. The world was made before the English language, and seemingly upon a different design. Suppose we held our converse not in words, but in music; those who have a bad ear would find

themselves cut off from all near commerce, and no better than foreigners in this big world. But we do not consider how many have "a bad ear" for words, nor how often the most eloquent find nothing to reply. I hate questioners and questions; there are so few that can be spoken to without a lie. "*Do you forgive me?*" Madam and sweetheart, so far as I have gone in life I have never yet been able to discover what forgiveness means. "*Is it still the same between us?*" Why, how can it be? It is eternally different; and yet you are still the friend of my heart. "*Do you understand me?*" God knows; I should think it highly improbable.

The cruellest lies are often told in silence. A man may have sat in a room for hours and not opened his teeth, and yet come out of that room a disloyal friend or a vile calumniator. And how many loves have perished because, from pride, or spite, or diffidence, or that unmanly shame which withholds a man from daring to betray emotion, a lover, at the critical point of the relation, has but hung his head and held his tongue? And, again, a lie may be told by a truth, or a truth conveyed through a lie. Truth to facts is not always truth to sentiment; and part of the truth, as often happens in answer to a question, may be the foulest calumny. A fact may be an exception; but the feeling is the

law, and it is that which you must neither garble nor belie. The whole tenor of a conversation is a part of the meaning of each separate statement; the beginning and the end define and travesty the intermediate conversation. You never speak to God; you address a fellow-man, full of his own tempers; and to tell the truth, rightly understood, is not to state the true facts, but to convey a true impression; truth in spirit, not truth to letter, is the true veracity. To reconcile averted friends a Jesuitical discretion is often needful, not so much to gain a kind hearing as to communicate sober truth. Women have an ill name in this connection; yet they live in as true relations; the lie of a good woman is the true index of her heart.

"It takes," says Thoreau, in the noblest and most useful passage I remember to have read in any modern author,¹ "two to speak truth—one to speak and another to hear." He must be very little experienced, or have no great zeal for truth, who does not recognise the fact. A grain of anger or a grain of suspicion produces strange acoustical effects, and makes the ear greedy to remark offence. Hence we find those who have once quarrelled carry themselves distantly, and are ever ready to break the truce.

¹ *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Wednesday, p. 28.

To speak truth there must be moral equality or else no respect; and hence between parent and child intercourse is apt to degenerate into a verbal fencing bout, and misapprehensions to become ingrained. And there is another side to this, for the parent begins with an imperfect notion of the child's character, formed in early years or during the equinoctial gales of youth; to this he adheres, noting only the facts which suit with his preconception; and wherever a person fancies himself unjustly judged, he at once and finally gives up the effort to speak truth. With our chosen friends, on the other hand, and still more between lovers (for mutual understanding is love's essence), the truth is easily indicated by the one and aptly comprehended by the other. A hint taken, a look understood, conveys the gist of long and delicate explanations; and where the life is known even *yea* and *nay* become luminous. In the closest of all relations—that of a love well founded and equally shared—speech is half discarded, like a roundabout, infantile process or a ceremony of formal etiquette; and the two communicate directly by their presences, and with few looks and fewer words contrive to share their good and evil and uphold each other's hearts in joy. For love rests upon a physical basis; it is a familiarity of nature's making and apart from

voluntary choice. Understanding has in some sort outrun knowledge, for the affection perhaps began with the acquaintance; and as it was not made like other relations, so it is not, like them, to be perturbed or clouded. Each knows more than can be uttered; each lives by faith, and believes by a natural compulsion; and between man and wife the language of the body is largely developed and grown strangely eloquent. The thought that prompted and was conveyed in a caress would only lose to be set down in words—ay, although Shakespeare himself should be the scribe.

Yet it is in these dear intimacies, beyond all others, that we must strive and do battle for the truth. Let but a doubt arise, and alas! all the previous intimacy and confidence is but another charge against the person doubted. *“What a monstrous dishonesty is this if I have been deceived so long and so completely!”* Let but that thought gain entrance, and you plead before a deaf tribunal. Appeal to the past; why, that is your crime! Make all clear, convince the reason; alas! spaciousness is but a proof against you. *“If you can abuse me now, the more likely that you have abused me from the first.”*

For a strong affection such moments are worth supporting, and they will end well; for

your advocate is in your lover's heart, and speaks her own language; it is not you but she herself who can defend and clear you of the charge. But in slighter intimacies, and for a less stringent union? Indeed, is it worth while? We are all *incompris*, only more or less concerned for the mischance; all trying wrongly to do right; all fawning at each other's feet like dumb, neglected lap-dogs. Sometimes we catch an eye—this is our opportunity in the ages—and we wag our tail with a poor smile. "*Is that all?*" All? If you only knew! But how can they know? They do not love us; the more fools we to squander life on the indifferent.

But the morality of the thing, you will be glad to hear, is excellent; for it is only by trying to understand others that we can get our own hearts understood; and in matters of human feeling the clement judge is the most successful pleader.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

TALK AND TALKERS

(From "Memories and Portraits")

TALK AND TALKERS

"Sir, we had a good talk."—JOHNSON.

"As we must account for every idle word, so we must for every idle silence."—FRANKLIN.

I

THERE can be no fairer ambition than to excel in talk; to be affable, gay, ready, clear, and welcome; to have a fact, a thought, or an illustration, pat to every subject; and not only to cheer the flight of time among our intimates, but bear our part in that great international congress, always sitting, where public wrongs are first declared, public errors first corrected, and the course of public opinion shaped, day by day, a little nearer to the right. No measure comes before Parliament but it has been long ago prepared by the grand jury of the talkers; no book is written that has not been largely composed by their assistance. Literature in many of its branches is no other than the shadow of good talk; but the imitation falls far short of the original in life, freedom, and effect. There are always two to a talk, giving and taking, comparing experience, and

according conclusions. Talk is fluid, tentative, continually "in further search and progress"; while written words remain fixed, become idols even to the writer, found wooden dogmatisms, and preserve flies of obvious error in the amber of the truth. Last and chief, while literature, gagged with linsey-woolsey, can only deal with a fraction of the life of man, talk goes fancy free and may call a spade a spade. Talk has none of the freezing immunities of the pulpit. It cannot, even if it would, become merely æsthetic or merely classical like literature. A jest intervenes, the solemn humbug is dissolved in laughter, and speech runs forth out of the contemporary groove into the open fields of nature, cheery and cheering, like schoolboys out of school. And it is in talk alone that we can learn our period and ourselves. In short, the first duty of a man is to speak; that is his chief business in this world; and talk, which is the harmonious speech of two or more, is by far the most accessible of pleasures. It costs nothing in money; it is all profit; it completes our education, founds and fosters our friendships, and can be enjoyed at any age and in almost any state of health.

The spice of life is battle; the friendliest relations are still a kind of contest; and if we would not forego all that is valuable in our lot,

we must continually face some other person, eye to eye, and wrestle a fall whether in love or enmity. It is still by force of body, or power of character or intellect, that we attain to worthy pleasures. Men and women contend for each other in the lists of love, like rival mesmerists; the active and adroit decide their challenges in the sports of the body; and the sedentary sit down to chess or conversation. All sluggish and pacific pleasures are, to the same degree, solitary and selfish; and every durable bond between human beings is founded in or heightened by some element of competition. Now, the relation that has the least root in matter is undoubtedly that airy one of friendship; and hence, I suppose, it is that good talk most commonly arises among friends. Talk is, indeed, both the scene and instrument of friendship. It is in talk alone that the friends can measure strength, and enjoy that amicable counter-assertion of personality which is the gauge of relations and the sport of life.

A good talk is not to be had for the asking. Humours must first be accorded in a kind of overture or prologue; hour, company, and circumstance be suited; and then, at a fit juncture, the subject, the quarry of two heated minds, spring up like a deer out of the wood. Not that the talker has any of the hunter's pride,

though he has all and more than all his ardour. The genuine artist follows the stream of conversation as an angler follows the windings of a brook, not dallying where he fails to "kill." He trusts implicitly to hazard; and he is rewarded by continual variety, continual pleasure, and those changing prospects of the truth that are the best of education. There is nothing in a subject, so called, that we should regard it as an idol, or follow it beyond the promptings of desire. Indeed, there are few subjects; and so far as they are truly talkable, more than the half of them may be reduced to three: that I am I, that you are you, and that there are other people dimly understood to be not quite the same as either. Wherever talk may range, it still runs half the time on these eternal lines. The theme being set, each plays on himself as on an instrument; asserts and justifies himself; ransacks his brain for instances and opinions, and brings them forth new-minted, to his own surprise and the admiration of his adversary. All natural talk is a festival of ostentation; and by the laws of the game each accepts and fans the vanity of the other. It is from that reason that we venture to lay ourselves so open, that we dare to be so warmly eloquent, and that we swell in each other's eyes to such a vast proportion. For talkers, once launched, begin to over-

flow the limits of their ordinary selves, tower up to the height of their secret pretensions, and give themselves out for the heroes, brave, pious, musical, and wise, that in their most shining moments they aspire to be. So they weave for themselves with words and for awhile inhabit a palace of delights, temple at once and theatre, where they fill the round of the world's dignities, and feast with the gods, exulting in Kudos. And when the talk is over, each goes his way, still flushed with vanity and admiration, still trailing clouds of glory; each declines from the height of his ideal orgie, not in a moment, but by slow declension. I remember, in the *entr'acte* of an afternoon performance, coming forth into the sunshine, in a beautiful green, gardened corner of a romantic city; and as I sat and smoked, the music moving in my blood, I seemed to sit there and evaporate *The Flying Dutchman* (for it was that I had been hearing) with a wonderful sense of life, warmth, well-being, and pride; and the noises of the city, voices, bells, and marching feet fell together in my ears like a symphonious orchestra. In the same way, the excitement of a good talk lives for a long while after in the blood, the heart still hot within you, the brain still simmering, and the physical earth swimming around you with the colours of the sunset.

Natural talk, like ploughing, should turn up a large surface of life, rather than dig mines into geological strata. Masses of experience, anecdote, incident, cross-lights, quotation, historical instances, the whole flotsam and jetsam of two minds forced in and in upon the matter in hand from every point of the compass, and from every degree of mental elevation and abasement—these are the material with which talk is fortified, the food on which the talkers thrive. Such argument as is proper to the exercise should still be brief and seizing. Talk should proceed by instances; by the apposite, not the expository. It should keep close along the lines of humanity, near the bosoms and businesses of men, at the level where history, fiction, and experience intersect and illuminate each other. I am I, and You are You, with all my heart; but conceive how these lean propositions change and brighten when, instead of words, the actual you and I sit cheek by jowl, the spirit housed in the live body, and the very clothes uttering voices to corroborate the story in the face. Not less surprising is the change when we leave off to speak of generalities—the bad, the good, the miser, and all the characters of Theophrastus—and call up other men, by anecdote or instance, in their very trick and feature; or trading on a common knowledge, toss

each other famous names, still glowing with the hues of life. Communication is no longer by words, but by the instancing of whole biographies, epics, systems of philosophy, and epochs of history, in bulk. That which is understood excels that which is spoken in quantity and quality alike; ideas thus figured and personified, change hands, as we may say, like coin; and the speakers imply without effort the most obscure and intricate thoughts. Strangers who have a large common ground of reading will, for this reason, come the sooner to the grapple of genuine converse. If they know Othello and Napoleon, Consuelo and Clarissa Harlowe, Vautrin and Steenie Steenson, they can leave generalities and begin at once to speak by figures.

Conduct and art are the two subjects that arise most frequently and that embrace the widest range of facts. A few pleasures bear discussion for their own sake, but only those which are most social or most radically human; and even these can only be discussed among their devotees. A technicality is always welcome to the expert, whether in athletics, art, or law; I have heard the best kind of talk on technicalities from such rare and happy persons as both know and love their business. No human being ever spoke of scenery for above two minutes

at a time, which makes me suspect we hear too much of it in literature. The weather is regarded as the very nadir and scoff of conversational topics. And yet the weather, the dramatic element in scenery, is far more tractable in language, and far more human both in import and suggestion than the stable features of the landscape. Sailors and shepherds, and the people generally of coast and mountain, talk well of it; and it is often excitingly presented in literature. But the tendency of all living talk draws it back and back into the common focus of humanity. Talk is a creature of the street and market-place, feeding on gossip; and its last resort is still in a discussion on morals. That is the heroic form of gossip; heroic in virtue of its high pretensions; but still gossip, because it turns on personalities. You can keep no men long, nor Scotchmen at all, off moral or theological discussion. These are to all the world what law is to lawyers; they are everybody's technicalities; the medium through which all consider life, and the dialect in which they express their judgments. I knew three young men who walked together daily for some two months in a solemn and beautiful forest and in cloudless summer weather; daily they talked with unabated zest, and yet scarce wandered that

whole time beyond two subjects—theology and love. And perhaps neither a court of love nor an assembly of divines would have granted their premises or welcomed their conclusions.

Conclusions, indeed, are not often reached by talk any more than by private thinking. That is not the profit. The profit is in the exercise, and above all in the experience; for when we reason at large on any subject, we review our state and history in life. From time to time, however, and specially, I think, in talking art, talk becomes effective, conquering like war, widening the boundaries of knowledge like an exploration. A point arises; the question takes a problematical, a baffling, yet a likely air; the talkers begin to feel lively presentiments of some conclusion near at hand; towards this they strive with emulous ardour, each by his own path, and struggling for first utterance; and then one leaps upon the summit of that matter with a shout, and almost at the same moment the other is beside him; and behold they are agreed. Like enough, the progress is illusory, a mere cat's cradle having been wound and unwound out of words. But the sense of joint discovery is none the less giddy and inspiring. And in the life of the talker such triumphs, though imaginary, are neither few nor far apart; they are at-

tained with speed and pleasure, in the hour of mirth; and by the nature of the process, they are always worthily shared.

There is a certain attitude, combative at once and deferential, eager to fight yet most averse to quarrel, which marks out at once the talkable man. It is not eloquence, not fairness, not obstinacy, but a certain proportion of all these that I love to encounter in my amicable adversaries. They must not be pontiffs holding doctrine, but huntsmen questing after elements of truth. Neither must they be boys to be instructed, but fellow-teachers with whom I may wrangle and agree on equal terms. We must reach some solution, some shadow of consent; for without that, eager talk becomes a torture. But we do not wish to reach it cheaply, or quickly, or without the tussle and effort wherein pleasure lies.

The very best talker, with me, is one whom I shall call Spring-Heel'd Jack. I say so, because I never knew any one who mingled so largely the possible ingredients of converse. In the Spanish proverb, the fourth man necessary to compound a salad, is a madman to mix it: Jack is that madman. I know not which is more remarkable; the insane lucidity of his conclusions, the humourous eloquence of his language, or his power of method, bringing the whole of life into the focus of the subject

treated, mixing the conversational salad like a drunken god. He doubles like the serpent, changes and flashes like the shaken kaleidoscope, transmigrates bodily into the views of others, and so, in the twinkling of an eye and with a heady rapture, turns questions inside out and flings them empty before you on the ground, like a triumphant conjuror. It is my common practice when a piece of conduct puzzles me, to attack it in the presence of Jack with such grossness, such partiality, and such wearing iteration, as at length shall spur him up in its defence. In a moment he transmigrates, dons the required character, and with moonstruck philosophy justifies the act in question. I can fancy nothing to compare with the *vim* of these impersonations, the strange scale of language, flying from Shakespeare to Kant, from Kant to Major Dyngwell—

“As fast as a musician scatters sounds
Out of an instrument—”

the sudden, sweeping generalisations, the absurd irrelevant particularities, the wit, wisdom, folly, humour, eloquence, and pathos, each startling in its kind, and yet all luminous in the admired disorder of their combination. A talker of a different calibre, though belonging to the same school, is Burly. Burly is a man of

a great presence; he commands a larger atmosphere, gives the impression of a grosser mass of character than most men. It has been said of him that his presence could be felt in a room you entered blindfold; and the same, I think, has been said of other powerful constitutions condemned to much physical inaction. There is something boisterous and piratic in Burly's manner of talk which suits well enough with this impression. He will roar you down, he will bury his face in his hands, he will undergo passions of revolt and agony; and meanwhile his attitude of mind is really both conciliatory and receptive; and after Pistol has been out-Pistol'd, and the welkin rung for hours, you begin to perceive a certain subsidence in these spring torrents, points of agreement issue, and you end arm-in-arm, and in a glow of mutual admiration. The outcry only serves to make your final union the more unexpected and precious. Throughout there has been perfect sincerity, perfect intelligence, a desire to hear although not always to listen, and an unaffected eagerness to meet concessions. You have, with Burly, none of the dangers that attend debate with Spring-Heel'd Jack; who may at any moment turn his powers of transmigration on yourself, create for you a view you never held, and then furiously fall on you for holding it.

These, at least, are my two favourites, and both are loud, copious, intolerant talkers. This argues that I myself am in the same category; for if we love talking at all, we love a bright, fierce adversary, who will hold his ground, foot by foot, in much our own manner, sell his attention dearly, and give us our full measure of the dust and exertion of battle. Both these men can be beat from a position, but it takes six hours to do it; a high and hard adventure, worth attempting. With both you can pass days in an enchanted country of the mind, with people, scenery, and manners of its own; live a life apart, more arduous, active, and glowing than any real existence; and come forth again when the talk is over, as out of a theatre or a dream, to find the east wind still blowing and the chimney-pots of the old battered city still around you. Jack has the far finer mind, Burly the far more honest; Jack gives us the animated poetry, Burly the romantic prose, of similar themes; the one glances high like a meteor and makes a light in darkness; the other, with many changing hues of fire, burns at the sea-level, like a conflagration; but both have the same humour and artistic interests, the same unquenched ardour in pursuit, the same gusts of talk and thunderclaps of contradiction.

Cockshot¹ is a different article, but vastly entertaining, and has been meat and drink to me for many a long evening. His manner is dry, brisk, and pertinacious, and the choice of words not much. The point about him is his extraordinary readiness and spirit. You can propound nothing but he has either a theory about it ready-made, or will have one instantly on the stocks, and proceed to lay its timbers and launch it in your presence. "Let me see," he will say. "Give me a moment. I *should* have some theory for that." A blither spectacle than the vigour with which he sets about the task, it were hard to fancy. He is possessed by a demoniac energy, welding the elements for his life, and bending ideas, as an athlete bends a horseshoe, with a visible and lively effort. He has, in theorising, a compass, an art; what I would call the synthetic gusto; something of a Herbert Spencer, who should see the fun of the thing. You are not bound, and no more is he, to place your faith in these brand-new opinions. But some of them are right enough, durable even for life; and the poorest serve for a cockshy—as when idle people, after picnics, float a bottle on a pond and have an hour's diversion ere it sinks. Whichever they are, serious opinions or humours of the moment, he still defends

¹ The late Fleeming Jenkin.

his ventures with indefatigable wit and spirit, hitting savagely himself, but taking punishment like a man. He knows and never forgets that people talk, first of all, for the sake of talking; conducts himself in the ring, to use the old slang, like a thorough "glutton," and honestly enjoys a telling facer from his adversary. Cockshot is bottled effervescency, the sworn foe of sleep. Three-in-the-morning Cockshot, says a victim. His talk is like the driest of all imaginable dry champagnes. Sleight of hand and inimitable quickness are the qualities by which he lives. Athelred, on the other hand, presents you with the spectacle of a sincere and somewhat slow nature thinking aloud. He is the most unready man I ever knew to shine in conversation. You may see him sometimes wrestle with a refractory jest for a minute or two together, and perhaps fail to throw it in the end. And there is something singularly engaging, often instructive, in the simplicity with which he thus exposes the process as well as the result, the works as well as the dial of the clock. Withal he has his hours of inspiration. Apt words come to him as if by accident, and, coming from deeper down, they smack the more personally, they have the more of fine old crusted humanity, rich in sediment and humour. There are sayings of his in which he has stamped himself into the

very grain of the language; you would think he must have worn the words next his skin and slept with them. Yet it is not as a sayer of particular good things that Athelred is most to be regarded, rather as the stalwart woodman of thought. I have pulled on a light cord often enough, while he has been wielding the broad-axe; and between us, on this unequal division, many a spacious fallacy has fallen. I have known him to battle the same question night after night for years, keeping it in the reign of talk, constantly applying it and re-applying it to life with humourous or grave intention, and all the while, never hurrying, nor flagging, nor taking an unfair advantage of the facts. Jack at a given moment, when arising, as it were, from the tripod, can be more radiantly just to those from whom he differs; but then the tenor of his thoughts is even calumnious; while Athelred, slower to forge excuses, is yet slower to condemn, and sits over the welter of the world, vacillating but still judicial, and still faithfully contending with his doubts.

Both the last talkers deal much in points of conduct and religion studied in the "dry light" of prose. Indirectly and as if against his will the same elements from time to time appear in the troubled and poetic talk of Opalstein. His various and exotic knowledge, complete al-

though unready sympathies, and fine, full, discriminative flow of language, fit him out to be the best of talkers; so perhaps he is with some, not *quite* with me—*proxime accessit*, I should say. He sings the praises of the earth and the arts, flowers and jewels, wine and music, in a moonlight, serenading manner, as to the light guitar; even wisdom comes from his tongue like singing; no one is, indeed, more tuneful in the upper notes. But even while he sings the song of the Sirens, he still hearkens to the barking of the Sphinx. Jarring Byronic notes interrupt the flow of his Horatian humours. His mirth has something of the tragedy of the world for its perpetual background; and he feasts like Don Giovanni to a double orchestra, one lightly sounding for the dance, one pealing Beethoven in the distance. He is not truly reconciled either with life or with himself; and this instant war in his members sometimes divides the man's attention. He does not always, perhaps not often, frankly surrender himself in conversation. He brings into the talk other thoughts than those which he expresses; you are conscious that he keeps an eye on something else, that he does not shake off the world, nor quite forget himself. Hence arise occasional disappointments; even an occasional unfairness for his companions, who find themselves one day giving too

much, and the next, when they are wary out of season, giving perhaps too little. Purcel is in another class from any I have mentioned. He is no debater, but appears in conversation, as occasion rises, in two distinct characters, one of which I admire and fear, and the other love. In the first, he is radiantly civil and rather silent, sits on a high, courtly hilltop, and from that vantage-ground drops you his remarks like favours. He seems not to share in our sublunary contentions; he wears no sign of interest; when on a sudden there falls in a crystal of wit, so polished that the dull do not perceive it, but so right that the sensitive are silenced. True talk should have more body and blood, should be louder, vainer and more declaratory of the man; the true talker should not hold so steady an advantage over whom he speaks with; and that is one reason out of a score why I prefer my Purcel in his second character, when he unbends into a strain of graceful gossip, singing like the fireside kettle. In these moods he has an elegant homeliness that rings of the true Queen Anne. I know another person who attains, in his moments, to the insolence of a Restoration comedy, speaking, I declare, as Congreve wrote; but that is a sport of nature, and scarce falls under the rubric, for there is none, alas! to give him answer.

One last remark occurs: It is the mark of genuine conversation that the sayings can scarce be quoted with their full effect beyond the circle of common friends. To have their proper weight they should appear in a biography, and with the portrait of the speaker. Good talk is dramatic; it is like an impromptu piece of acting where each should represent himself to the greatest advantage; and that is the best kind of talk where each speaker is most fully and candidly himself, and where, if you were to shift the speeches round from one to another, there would be the greatest loss in significance and perspicuity. It is for this reason that talk depends so wholly on our company. We should like to introduce Falstaff and Mercutio, or Falstaff and Sir Toby; but Falstaff in talk with Cordelia seems even painful. Most of us, by the Protean quality of man, can talk to some degree with all; but the true talk, that strikes out all the slumbering best of us, comes only with the peculiar brethren of our spirits, is founded as deep as love in the constitution of our being, and is a thing to relish with all our energy, while yet we have it, and to be grateful for for ever.

TALK AND TALKERS ¹

II

IN the last paper there was perhaps too much about mere debate; and there was nothing said at all about that kind of talk which is merely luminous and restful, a higher power of silence, the quiet of the evening shared by ruminating friends. There is something, aside from personal preference, to be alleged in support of this omission. Those who are no chimney-cornerers, who rejoice in the social thunderstorm, have a ground in reason for their choice. They get little rest indeed; but restfulness is a quality for cattle; the virtues are all active, life is alert, and it is in repose that men prepare themselves for evil. On the other hand, they are bruised into a knowledge of themselves and others; they have in a high degree the fencer's pleasure in dexterity displayed and proved; what they get they get upon life's terms, paying for it as they go; and once the talk is launched, they are assured of honest dealing from an adversary

¹ This sequel was called forth by an excellent article in *The Spectator*.

eager like themselves. The aboriginal man within us, the cave-dweller, still lusty as when he fought tooth and nail for roots and berries, scents this kind of equal battle from afar; it is like his old primæval days upon the crags, a return to the sincerity of savage life from the comfortable fictions of the civilised. And if it be delightful to the Old Man, it is none the less profitable to his younger brother, the conscientious gentleman. I feel never quite sure of your urbane and smiling coteries; I fear they indulge a man's vanities in silence, suffer him to encroach, encourage him on to be an ass, and send him forth again, not merely contemned for the moment, but radically more contemptible than when he entered. But if I have a flushed, blustering fellow for my opposite, bent on carrying a point, my vanity is sure to have its ears rubbed, once at least, in the course of the debate. He will not spare me when we differ; he will not fear to demonstrate my folly to my face.

For many natures there is not much charm in the still, chambered society, the circle of bland countenances, the digestive silence, the admired remark, the flutter of affectionate approval. They demand more atmosphere and exercise; "a gale upon their spirits," as our pious ancestors would phrase it; to have their wits well breathed in an uproarious Valhalla. And

I suspect that the choice, given their character and faults, is one to be defended. The purely wise are silenced by facts; they talk in a clear atmosphere, problems lying around them like a view in nature; if they can be shown to be somewhat in the wrong, they digest the reproof like a thrashing, and make better intellectual blood. They stand corrected by a whisper; a word or a glance reminds them of the great eternal law. But it is not so with all. Others in conversation seek rather contact with their fellow-men than increase of knowledge or clarity of thought. The drama, not the philosophy, of life is the sphere of their intellectual activity. Even when they pursue truth, they desire as much as possible of what we may call human scenery along the road they follow. They dwell in the heart of life; the blood sounding in their ears, their eyes laying hold of what delights them with a brutal avidity that makes them blind to all besides, their interest riveted on people, living, loving, talking, tangible people. To a man of this description, the sphere of argument seems very pale and ghostly. By a strong expression, a perturbed countenance, floods of tears, an insult which his conscience obliges him to swallow, he is brought round to knowledge which no syllogism would have conveyed to him. His own experience is so vivid, he is so

superlatively conscious of himself, that if, day after day, he is allowed to hector and hear nothing but approving echoes, he will lose his hold on the soberness of things and take himself in earnest for a god. Talk might be to such an one the very way of moral ruin; the school where he might learn to be at once intolerable and ridiculous.

This character is perhaps commoner than philosophers suppose. And for persons of that stamp to learn much by conversation, they must speak with their superiors, not in intellect, for that is a superiority that must be proved, but in station. If they cannot find a friend to bully them for their good, they must find either an old man, a woman, or someone so far below them in the artificial order of society, that courtesy may be particularly exercised.

The best teachers are the aged. To the old our mouths are always partly closed; we must swallow our obvious retorts and listen. They sit above our heads, on life's raised daïs, and appeal at once to our respect and pity. A flavour of the old school, a touch of something different in their manner—which is freer and rounder, if they come of what is called a good family, and often more timid and precise if they are of the middle class—serves, in these days, to accentuate the difference of age and add a

distinction to grey hairs. But their superiority is founded more deeply than by outward marks or gestures. They are before us in the march of man; they have more or less solved the irking problem; they have battled through the equinox of life; in good and evil they have held their course; and now, without open shame, they near the crown and harbour. It may be we have been struck with one of fortune's darts; we can scarce be civil, so cruelly is our spirit tossed. Yet long before we were so much as thought upon, the like calamity befell the old man or woman that now, with pleasant humour, rallies us upon our inattention, sitting composed in the holy evening of man's life, in the clear shining after rain. We grow ashamed of our distresses, new and hot and coarse, like villainous roadside brandy; we see life in aerial perspective, under the heavens of faith; and out of the worst, in the mere presence of contented elders, look forward and take patience. Fear shrinks before them "like a thing reprov'd," not the flitting and ineffectual fear of death, but the instant, dwelling terror of the responsibilities and revenges of life. Their speech, indeed, is timid; they report lions in the path; they counsel a meticulous footing; but their serene, marred faces are more eloquent and tell another story. Where they have gone, we will go also, not very

greatly fearing; what they have endured unbroken, we also, God helping us, will make a shift to bear.

Not only is the presence of the aged in itself remedial, but their minds are stored with antidotes, wisdom's simples, plain considerations overlooked by youth. They have matter to communicate, be they never so stupid. Their talk is not merely literature, it is great literature; classic in virtue of the speaker's detachment, studded, like a book of travel, with things we should not otherwise have learnt. In virtue, I have said, of the speaker's detachment,—and this is why, of two old men, the one who is not your father speaks to you with the more sensible authority; for in the paternal relation the oldest have lively interests and remain still young. Thus I have known two young men great friends; each swore by the other's father; the father of each swore by the other lad; and yet each pair of parent and child were perpetually by the ears. This is typical: it reads like the germ of some kindly comedy.

The old appear in conversation in two characters: the critically silent and the garrulous anecdotic. The last is perhaps what we look for; it is perhaps the more instructive. An old gentleman, well on in years, sits handsomely and naturally in the bow-window of his age,

scanning experience with reverted eye; and chirping and smiling, communicates the accidents and reads the lesson of his long career. Opinions are strengthened, indeed, but they are also weeded out in the course of years. What remains steadily present to the eye of the retired veteran in his hermitage, what still ministers to his content, what still quickens his old honest heart—these are “the real long-lived things” that Whitman tells us to prefer. Where youth agrees with age, not where they differ, wisdom lies; and it is when the young disciple finds his heart to beat in tune with his grey-bearded teacher’s that a lesson may be learned. I have known one old gentleman, whom I may name, for he is now gathered to his stock—Robert Hunter, Sheriff of Dunbarton, and author of an excellent law-book still re-edited and republished. Whether he was originally big or little is more than I can guess. When I knew him he was all fallen away and fallen in; crooked and shrunken; buckled into a stiff waistcoat for support; troubled by ailments, which kept him hobbling in and out of the room; one foot gouty; a wig for decency, not for deception, on his head; close shaved, except under his chin—and for that he never failed to apologise, for it went sore against the traditions of his life. You can imagine how he would fare in a novel by

Miss Mather; yet this rag of a Chelsea veteran lived to his last year in the plenitude of all that is best in man, brimming with human kindness, and staunch as a Roman soldier under his manifold infirmities. You could not say that he had lost his memory, for he would repeat Shakespeare and Webster and Jeremy Taylor and Burke by the page together; but the parchment was filled up, there was no room for fresh inscriptions, and he was capable of repeating the same anecdote on many successive visits. His voice survived in its full power, and he took a pride in using it. On his last voyage as Commissioner of Lighthouses, he hailed a ship at sea and made himself clearly audible without a speaking-trumpet, ruffling the while with a proper vanity in his achievement. He had a habit of eking out his words with interrogative hems, which was puzzling and a little wearisome, suited ill with his appearance, and seemed a survival from some former stage of bodily portliness. Of yore, when he was a great pedestrian and no enemy to good claret, he may have pointed with these minute guns his allocutions to the bench. His humour was perfectly equable, set beyond the reach of fate; gout, rheumatism, stone, and gravel might have combined their forces against that frail tabernacle, but when I came round on Sunday evening, he

would lay aside Jeremy Taylor's *Life of Christ* and greet me with the same open brow, the same kind formality of manner. His opinions and sympathies dated the man almost to a decade. He had begun life, under his mother's influence, as an admirer of Junius, but on maturer knowledge had transferred his admiration to Burke. He cautioned me, with entire gravity, to be punctilious in writing English; never to forget that I was a Scotchman, that English was a foreign tongue, and that if I attempted the colloquial, I should certainly be shamed: the remark was apposite, I suppose, in the days of David Hume. Scott was too new for him; he had known the author—known him, too, for a Tory; and to the genuine classic a contemporary is always something of a trouble. He had the old, serious love of the play; had even, as he was proud to tell, played a certain part in the history of Shakespearian revivals, for he had successfully pressed on Murray, of the old Edinburgh Theatre, the idea of producing Shakespeare's fairy pieces with great scenic display. A moderate in religion, he was much struck in the last years of his life by a conversation with two young lads, revivalists. "H'm," he would say—"new to me. I have had—h'm—no such experience." It struck him, not with pain, rather with a solemn philosophic interest, that

he, a Christian as he hoped, and a Christian of so old a standing, should hear these young fellows talking of his own subject, his own weapons that he had fought the battle of life with,—“and—h’m—not understand.” In this wise and graceful attitude he did justice to himself and others, reposed unshaken in his old beliefs, and recognised their limits without anger or alarm. His last recorded remark, on the last night of his life, was after he had been arguing against Calvinism with his minister and was interrupted by an intolerable pang. “After all,” he said, “of all the ’isms, I know none so bad as rheumatism.” My own last sight of him was some time before, when we dined together at an inn; he had been on circuit, for he stuck to his duties like a chief part of his existence; and I remember it as the only occasion on which he ever soiled his lips with slang—a thing he loathed. We were both Roberts; and as we took our places at table, he addressed me with a twinkle: “We are just what you would call two bob.” He offered me port, I remember, as the proper milk of youth; spoke of “twenty-shilling notes”; and throughout the meal was full of old-world pleasantry and quaintness, like an ancient boy on a holiday. But what I recall chiefly was his confession that he had never read *Othello* to an end. Shakespeare was

his continual study. He loved nothing better than to display his knowledge and memory by adducing parallel passages from Shakespeare, passages where the same word was employed, or the same idea differently treated. But *Othello* had beaten him. "That noble gentleman and that noble lady—h'm—too painful for me." The same night the hoardings were covered with posters, "Burlesque of *Othello*," and the contrast blazed up in my mind like a bonfire. An unforgettable look it gave me into that kind man's soul. His acquaintance was indeed a liberal and pious education. All the humanities were taught in that bare dining-room beside his gouty footstool. He was a piece of good advice; he was himself the instance that pointed and adorned his various talk. Nor could a young man have found elsewhere a place so set apart from envy, fear, discontent, or any of the passions that debase; a life so honest and composed; a soul like an ancient violin, so subdued to harmony, responding to a touch in music—as in that dining-room, with Mr. Hunter chatting at the eleventh hour, under the shadow of eternity, fearless and gentle.

The second class of old people are not anecdotic; they are rather hearers than talkers, listening to the young with an amused and critical attention. To have this sort of intercourse to

perfection, I think we must go to old ladies. Women are better hearers than men, to begin with; they learn, I fear in anguish, to bear with the tedious and infantile vanity of the other sex; and we will take more from a woman than even from the oldest man in the way of biting comment. Biting comment is the chief part, whether for profit or amusement, in this business. The old lady that I have in my eye is a very caustic speaker, her tongue, after years of practice, in absolute command, whether for silence or attack. If she chances to dislike you, you will be tempted to curse the malignity of age. But if you chance to please even slightly, you will be listened to with a particular laughing grace of sympathy, and from time to time chastised, as if in play, with a parasol as heavy as a pole-axe. It requires a singular art, as well as the vantage-ground of age, to deal these stunning corrections among the coxcombs of the young. The pill is disguised in sugar of wit; it is administered as a compliment—if you had not pleased, you would not have been censured; it is a personal affair—a hyphen, a *trait d'union*, between you and your censor; age's philandering, for her pleasure and your good. Incontestably the young man feels very much of a fool; but he must be a perfect Malvolio, sick with self-love, if he cannot take an open buffet and

still smile. The correction of silence is what kills; when you know you have transgressed, and your friend says nothing and avoids your eye. If a man were made of gutta-percha, his heart would quail at such a moment. But when the word is out, the worst is over; and a fellow with any good-humour at all may pass through a perfect hail of witty criticism, every bare place on his soul hit to the quick with a shrewd missile, and reappear, as if after a dive, tingling with a fine moral reaction, and ready with a shrinking readiness, one-third loath, for a repetition of the discipline.

There are few women, not well sunned and ripened, and perhaps toughened, who can thus stand apart from a man and say the true thing with a kind of genial cruelty. Still there are some—and I doubt if there be any man who can return the compliment. The class of man represented by Vernon Whitford in *The Egoist* says, indeed, the true thing, but he says it stockishly. Vernon is a noble fellow, and makes, by the way, a noble and instructive contrast to Daniel Deronda; his conduct is the conduct of a man of honour; but we agree with him, against our consciences, when he remorsefully considers “its astonishing dryness.” He is the best of men, but the best of women manage to combine all that and something more.

Their very faults assist them; they are helped even by the falseness of their position in life. They can retire into the fortified camp of the proprieties. They can touch a subject and suppress it. The most adroit employ a somewhat elaborate reserve as a means to be frank, much as they wear gloves when they shake hands. But a man has the full responsibility of his freedom, cannot evade a question, can scarce be silent without rudeness, must answer for his words upon the moment, and is not seldom left face to face with a damning choice, between the more or less dishonourable wriggling of Deronda and the downright woodenness of Vernon Whitford.

But the superiority of women is perpetually menaced; they do not sit throned on infirmities like the old; they are suitors as well as sovereigns; their vanity is engaged, their affections are too apt to follow; and hence much of the talk between the sexes degenerates into something unworthy of the name. The desire to please, to shine with a certain softness of lustre and to draw a fascinating picture of oneself, banishes from conversation all that is sterling and most of what is humorous. As soon as a strong current of mutual admiration begins to flow, the human interest triumphs entirely over the intellectual, and the commerce of words,

consciously or not, becomes secondary to the commercing of eyes. But even where this ridiculous danger is avoided, and a man and woman converse equally and honestly, something in their nature or their education falsifies the strain. An instinct prompts them to agree; and where that is impossible, to agree to differ. Should they neglect the warning, at the first suspicion of an argument, they find themselves in different hemispheres. About any point of business or conduct, any actual affair demanding settlement, a woman will speak and listen, hear and answer arguments, not only with natural wisdom, but with candour and logical honesty. But if the subject of debate be something in the air, an abstraction, and excuse for talk, a logical Aunt Sally, then may the male debater instantly abandon hope; he may employ reason, adduce facts, be supple, be smiling, be angry, all shall avail him nothing; what the woman said first, that (unless she has forgotten it) she will repeat at the end. Hence, at the very junctures when a talk between men grows brighter and quicker and begins to promise to bear fruit, talk between the sexes is menaced with dissolution. The point of difference, the point of interest, is evaded by the brilliant woman, under a shower of irrelevant conversational rockets; it is bridged by the discreet

woman with a rustle of silk, as she passes smoothly forward to the nearest point of safety. And this sort of prestidigitation, juggling the dangerous topic out of sight until it can be re-introduced with safety in an altered shape, is a piece of tactics among the true drawing-room queens.

The drawing-room is, indeed, an artificial place; it is so by our choice and for our sins. The subjection of women; the ideal imposed upon them from the cradle, and worn, like a hair-shirt, with so much constancy; their motherly, superior tenderness to man's vanity and self-importance; their managing arts—the arts of a civilised slave among good-natured barbarians—are all painful ingredients and all help to falsify relations. It is not till we get clear of that amusing artificial scene that genuine relations are founded, or ideas honestly compared. In the garden, on the road or the hillside, or *tête-à-tête* and apart from interruptions, occasions arise when we may learn much from any single woman; and nowhere more often than in married life. Marriage is one long conversation, chequered by disputes. The disputes are valueless; they but ingrain the difference; the heroic heart of woman prompting her at once to nail her colours to the mast. But in the intervals, almost unconsciously and with no desire

to shine, the whole material of life is turned over and over, ideas are struck out and shared, the two persons more and more adapt their notions one to suit the other, and in process of time, without sound of trumpet, they conduct each other into new worlds of thought.

THE END



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